Katherine Balfour

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

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Dr. Mirabel's Theory

BY

Ross George Dering

Author of 'Giraldi'

'The Undergraduate,' etc.

A PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY

"Mind and matter," said the lady in the wig, "glide swift into the vortex of Immensity."—DICKENS.

In Three Volumes

Vol. III.

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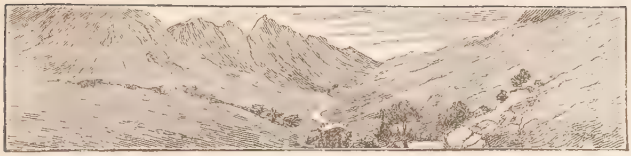

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DR. MIRABEL'S THEORY.

CHAPTER I.

THE LIGHT GOES OUT.

IT need scarcely be said that Gerard did not share the elation of his parents at his glowing prospects. Caring very little, naturally, for mercantile interests and pursuits, he was yet shrewd enough to have very serious doubts of the substantiality of the Swedish project; he knew the promoter of the company to be a scamp, and suspected that the Directorate was made up of fools and knaves; and his principal concern was for the disappointment which he felt sure

awaited his confiding father and mother. In addition to this, what chiefly occupied his mind was the uncertainty oppressing him with respect to his infatuation for Madame Mirabel. The recency of her widowhood had of course deterred him from speaking to her on the subject hitherto; he longed to know his fate, and yet was afraid to tempt it; rejection would crush him to the earth, while acceptance—his heart leaped at the very thought—would almost certainly involve the greatest pain to one, at any rate, of his parents. It was true that Madame Mirabel had been a welcome guest in their house, and that Mrs. Palliser was now on very cordial terms with her; but he felt instinctively that she would recoil in dismay from the idea of receiving such a person as a daughter-in-law, even apart from her known advocacy of Rosie Chattering. *That*, of course, was a thing that could never be. Had there been no other woman in the world, nothing, he vowed, would ever induce

him to enter into an engagement with so entirely uninteresting, unsympathetic, and empty-headed a creature as his mother's favourite. Meanwhile, however, he was not in a position to marry anybody; unless, of course, this wonderful company should really turn out successful, in which case—and then his heart-searchings would begin all over afresh, and he felt more undecided what to do than ever.

The aimlessness of his life, too, weighed upon him very heavily. It is true that here the fault lay with Mr. Palliser, whose harum-scarum, unpractical turn of mind led him to reject many excellent openings for Gerard because they were not sufficiently brilliant, and to be ever on the look-out for some sensational and splendid opportunity to arise by which his clever son might achieve fame in six months and fortune in a year at most. Gerard saw the visionariness of these foolish schemes, but was powerless to take any step himself. There was a certain indolence

about him, too, and an undefined longing to 'do something'—something great and practical—something that should prove of value to mankind at large—which prevented him from doing anything at all; and this led him to cherish much morbid discontent, and to talk a vast deal of cheap pessimism between the puffs of his meerschaum pipe, in a way that irritated his good mother considerably.

"You're an ungrateful, impious, naughty boy, to speak like that," she said to him on one occasion. "One would think you didn't believe in an over-ruling Providence at all; indeed I'm very much afraid you don't, my dear, and *I* think it's a most shocking thing. Here's your fortune as good as made,—or will be, when you get this appointment in Sweden; and then you'll be in a position to marry as soon as ever you like. There are thousands of young men who would give their ears to be in the same position; and yet there you sit moralising and grumbling

and disparaging everything till I don't know how to bear with you. I declare you make me lose all patience with you sometimes."

"When I get the appointment in Sweden, mother—and begin to make all those thousands a year—my views of life may possibly undergo a change," remarked Gerard, slowly.

"Well, I hope they will, my dear," retorted Mrs. Palliser. "Nothing like an active, successful life for inspiring cheerfulness and faith. And I do hope, Gerard, that when once you *are* settled, you'll think seriously of marrying. I believe in early marriages, you know, and always have. It keeps young men straight to marry early, and gives them something to think about and work for."

"I've no objection, mother—supposing the right sort of person is available," replied Gerard, carelessly.

"The right sort of person *is* available, my dear," said Mrs. Palliser with energy. "It has not pleased God to give me a daughter,

and that has been the great sorrow of my life. But you—well, Gerard, you can supply the deficiency. When you bring me some dear, sweet, unsophisticated girl, brought up under nice Christian influences in a refined home, it will be the happiest day I shall have had since you were born to me. Now I'm not a matchmaker, my dear, and never was. I believe in young people being left to arrange their own affairs with each other; but you know perfectly well, Gerard, how fond I am of dear Rosie Chattering, and how ardently I have hoped that you might like her too. What can you want more? She's pretty, she's amiable, she's refined, she has excellent principles, and I believe she's already rather fond of *you*, my dear. Of course, I say nothing; I wouldn't interfere, I wouldn't even suggest such a thing to you, for a moment; but—but"—and here the good lady stopped short with a look of wistful appeal that had a very sensible effect on Gerard.

"I wish you could see, mother, how utterly unsuited we are to one another," he observed, mildly.

"Well, I must say I *don't* see it, my dear," replied Mrs. Palliser. "What is there unsuitable between you, I should like to know?"

"In the first place," said Gerard, "I'm not in love with her. That of itself is enough, I should think. Secondly, I must honestly tell you, mother, that I do not share your admiration for her in the smallest degree; in fact I rather dislike her. And thirdly we haven't a single interest or idea in common, nor is there as far as I know any one point of sympathy between us. Under these circumstances I think it not unlikely that our marriage might turn out a failure."

"I never heard of such a thing since I was born!" exclaimed Mrs. Palliser with her most astounded air. "You must be very hard to please, it seems to me. However, if that is the case, I'll say no more;

though it's a disappointment to me, Gerard, a very grievous disappointment, I assure you. I only hope you haven't gone and got entangled with anybody else, that's all. There's nobody I can think of in *this* neighbourhood, anyhow; what you may have been about elsewhere, of course I can't possibly tell."

Gerard did not enlighten his mother any further, and after a few moments a diversion occurred in the entrance of old Mrs. Palliser in her wheeled chair, accompanied by Nurse Osborne. The old lady had been failing visibly during the past few weeks; but all the painful features of her alienation had disappeared, and as she seemed rather to enjoy an occasional change from her own room the doctor had given permission for her to spend an hour or two downstairs every afternoon.

"Ah, here she is!" exclaimed Mrs. Palliser cheerfully, as she rose from her seat and went forward to move a chair or two

out of the way. "Not too near the fire, nurse—the room's very warm, and I think she likes being by the window better; it amuses her to look out and watch the birds. It's such a fine, bright afternoon, too. Gerard, dear, just help me to move this table, will you? The least bit will do—that's it. And how has she been all the morning, nurse?"

"Much as usual," said the nurse, with a pleasant smile. "She doesn't seem to take much notice, but she's been comfortable enough, I think."

The old lady was soon comfortably settled near the window, which commanded a cheerful view of the garden, now looking almost gay in the pale yellow light of an April sun. She had not been there ten minutes before Dr. Lancaster arrived. He usually came in two or three times a week to see how she was getting on, and although, of course, there was not the slightest chance of her recovery, his visits did her good. She was

not only flattered by the attentions of her dear 'Sir Anthony,' but cheered by the doctor's genial presence, and sympathetic manners; so true is it that a cheerful countenance doeth good like a medicine—and even more good, in many cases, though what would become of apothecaries if the aphorism were carried into general practice is of course another question. But of one thing we may be sure—that no man of solemn or lugubrious countenance ought ever to be a doctor.

"Well," said Lancaster, as he went forward and took a seat by the side of the old lady, "watching the birds, eh? We shall have to get you out into the garden itself when the warm weather comes. Rather too cold just now, you know. You're fond of looking out of doors, aren't you?"

The old lady nodded with a contented air, but made no reply.

"She has a wonderful fancy for looking out of the window," remarked Nurse

Osborne. "Her brain always seems clearer then, and she don't get those fantastic notions in her head that she does when the blinds are down."

"Ah, I dare say not," answered Lancaster, observing the old lady's face. "It's more cheerful out of doors than in, isn't it?" he said, trying to rouse her attention.

"Ay," she murmured slowly, and in a very feeble voice. "There's the sun, and the birds, and they come and tell me all about heaven, where they live. They'll take me back with them some day, you know, my dear."

She nodded again, and then, apparently forgetting the doctor's presence, turned her head away and closed her eyes. Lancaster, willing to let her doze if she felt so inclined, rose from his seat and joined Mrs. Palliser and Gerard by the fire.

Mrs. Palliser now rang for tea, and Dr. Lancaster, who confessed himself as bad as any old woman where the social cup was

concerned, declared his intention of spending at least an hour with them and enjoying a rest and chat. He was very often tired, he said, but never too tired to talk, especially when his nerves were refreshed and braced with tea; and just then his presence was particularly welcome, as poor Mrs. Palliser was feeling all the freshness of her disappointment with respect to her cherished project, and Gerard, too, was somewhat out of tune. He respected Lancaster, and felt that the doctor understood him; while between his parents and himself there was scarcely any mental touch at all.

The conversation turned upon the topics of the day—politics, social questions, current literature, and so forth. Influenza was then just beginning to attract attention, and Mrs. Palliser seemed very eager to hear all about it; from which to leprosy was of course a natural and easy step, and Lancaster was eventually deep in a description of the Leper Settlement in Saghalien, a series of most

interesting articles on which had lately appeared in the *Stethoscope*. The idea of leprosy as an actually existing disorder seemed somewhat new to Mrs. Palliser, who now realised for the first time that the disease was not confined to people in the Bible; and she was much interested as Lancaster proceeded to describe the plans that were being made for the relief of the sufferers and the promotion of their social and moral welfare. The hospitals, the medical and missionary staffs, the regimen, and the attempted alleviation of pain—all these were already organised, and the best results had so far attended them; but what excited her wonder and admiration most of all was Lancaster's account of the Secular Mission which it was hoped would shortly be sent out to Saghalien, consisting of a certain number of devoted men and women distinct from the doctors and nurses, whose sole duty it would be to infuse that brightness into the lives of the unfortunate sufferers which comes

from social and intellectual activity. No longer would the leper be doomed to the dreadful isolation imposed upon him by the despairing cry 'Unclean, unclean;' no longer condemned to pass an animal existence of pain, and hopelessness, and barbarism, and unaided ignorance. There were men, now, ready and willing to take their lives in their hands, and, actuated by the sublimest spirit of self-sacrifice, to devote themselves to the great work of making lepers happy. In addition to spiritual and medical assistance the lepers of Saghalien were to enjoy those rays of sunshine which come from music, from pictures, from interesting and wholesome books, from poetry, even from the fairy-tales of science itself. Their *minds* were to be cared for, as well as their souls and bodies. Their lives were to be brightened, and made 'worth living.' The 'youth sublime' was no longer to be the exclusive prerogative of the healthy and the prosperous. In a word, the most desolate and

forsaken class of God's creatures were to be rescued from the limbo where they had been left so long to rot, and given such share as they could accept of the inheritance which is the birthright of us all.

Gerard said very little while Lancaster was explaining the details of this plan; indeed all pauses were sufficiently filled by the exclamations of wonder and approbation with which Mrs. Palliser punctuated his discourse. But he was not, for that reason, the less interested. On the contrary, the scheme impressed him very powerfully. It was the one thing he had ever heard that had really laid hold of him, and was calculated to fire his imagination. He now felt—and this was the initial stage of the process he was undergoing—what it was that had constituted one of the greatest needs that had been unconsciously oppressing him. He had wanted something he could admire. To a missionary he could not accord full admiration, first because he did not believe in the mis-

sionary's theology, and secondly because the missionary, as he said, enjoyed a good salary and all sorts of creature comforts; in fact, he made his living as most other people did, and got well paid for it too. But this was a different sort of thing altogether. Here was something he could not only admire, but reverence. And as he thought of the promised thousands a year he was to reap from the sale of non-intoxicating liquors, according to his parents' account, and contrasted such a life with the ideal now presented to his mind, his revulsion from the Swedish scheme grew into a sense of loathing. What was he to do? He had wanted counsel; well, here was a counsel of perfection. Would he have strength to follow it?

Mr. Palliser came in soon afterwards, and the conversation flowed into different channels. There was a breeziness and a cheeriness about the good gentleman's presence that affected most people very

pleasantly, and he was always glad to meet the doctor. He sat down on a low chair opposite the fire, and sipped his tea as though he thoroughly enjoyed it.

"Well, what's the news to-day?" said Lancaster, as he spread his hands out to the blaze.

"There's another revolution in Bolivia," replied Mr. Palliser, "according to the placards. I don't know what we're coming to, I'm sure. It seems to me, Lancaster, that the entire world is on the eve of some tremendous crisis."

"Oh, those revolutions in South America don't amount to much," said Lancaster, smiling. "A revolution there is simply what we call a change of Cabinet, only it's generally accompanied by a street procession or two in which a few people get a crack on the head by accident. It's their way of doing it, that's all."

"Ah," said Mr. Palliser, looking mighty portentous. "That's all very well, but it

plays the deuce with the share-market. I want another cup of tea, my dear—and I must beg you not to stint me of sugar this time, if you please. You never will give me anything I like, you perverse woman."

"My dear Marmaduke, I gave you two great lumps," exclaimed Mrs. Palliser, who never enjoyed herself more than when her husband pretended to scold her. "Dr. Lancaster, let me give you another cup too. Here are some nice hot tea-cakes, Marmaduke—have some, my dear."

"In order to take away all my appetite for dinner, I suppose," grumbled her husband, helping himself pretty liberally. "*I* know your tricks and your manners. Well, we'll hope this Bolivian business isn't serious—it may throw us all back again if it is. They say the army has revolted this time."

"How quiet your mother is!" remarked Mrs. Palliser after a short pause.

"How has the old dear been, to-day?" asked her husband, munching his cakes.

"Oh, very well—just as usual," replied Mrs. Palliser. "She ought to wake up, now, and have her tea."

Nurse Osborne looked up enquiringly, and Mrs. Palliser, rising, moved towards the old lady's chair near the window. Dr. Lancaster made some trivial observation to his host, preparatory to taking his departure, and began searching for his gloves. The sun was just setting.

"Dr. Lancaster! Marmaduke!" cried Mrs. Palliser suddenly.

Both turned in surprise. She was standing by the window at the further end of the room, bending over the old lady's chair. Lancaster hastily got up and joined her, while Mr. Palliser was struggling to his feet. For a minute there was dead silence.

"What's the matter?" demanded Mr. Palliser.

"O Marmaduke, the dear old lady's gone!" cried his wife, bursting into tears.

"Gone?" echoed her husband. "What—do you mean she's"——

He stood transfixed in the middle of the room, and for a few moments was unable to utter a word more. Mrs. Palliser sank into a chair trembling violently, and buried her face in her hands.

"My dear Sir," interposed Lancaster, gently, "I fear it is too true." He had been examining the old lady's eyes, and listening for her heart. "She has passed away—quite peacefully—in her sleep."

Mr. Palliser's mouth quivered a little, but he controlled himself. His wife wept openly, and Gerard was deeply moved. Yes, the old lady would never watch the birds again. There she lay in her chair, pale and still, an expression of entire content and peace upon her ivory features, calm in the majesty of death.

* * * * *

It was in deference to the personal wish of the old lady, now deceased, that her

husband had left the bulk of his fortune to his son Marmaduke, she herself declining to accept more than the very moderate competence of five hundred pounds a year. That, she said, was an ample provision for a woman of simple tastes with only herself to keep; while Marmaduke, then a young and active man, newly engaged to a lady who would bring him nothing, might reasonably look forward to having an expensive family. After her husband's death, his widow resided for some time upon the Continent; then she returned to England, and took a house in the neighbourhood of Dulwich; and it was not until seven years before the opening of this story, that, beginning to feel the infirmities of age, and wishing to try a drier and more bracing atmosphere, she had accepted the urgent invitation of the Pallisers to make her home with them. It was well she did so, for, a considerable portion of her competence being invested in East and West India

Dock shares, she soon found herself deprived of two hundred pounds of annual income; and the loss would have been a rather serious one had she continued alone. Under her son's roof, however, the three hundred a year which still remained to her was naturally a great deal more than she could spend, and she was consequently able, not only to exercise considerable generosity, but also to save money. Thus, when she died, her accumulations amounted to nearly a thousand pounds; and this sum, together with the income of which she stood possessed, she bequeathed to her grandson Gerard.

CHAPTER II.

A DISCLOSURE AND A WARNING.

"MOTHER," said Madame Mirabel, a day or two after the events described in the last chapter, "I think it is time we came to some decision about your future plans."

"Which means, I suppose, that you've already decided," replied Mrs. Jickling, with a sharp glance.

"You shall first tell me what you think of my suggestions," said her daughter calmly. "It seems to me that even if you had not lost your annuity it would have been undesirable for you to continue housekeeping, which involves unnecessary trouble, loneli-

ness, and expense. My idea is that you should first go up to town, and sell off whatever furniture you may have; and then, when you come back, we will look out for some nice boarding-house. That will be far more cheerful for you than living all alone, and no doubt we shall be able to make good terms on the understanding that you stay permanently. Of course I shall add something to what you have still left, and the sale of your effects in Royalty Park will place you in funds to start with."

"H'm!" muttered Mrs. Jickling, thoughtfully. "And whereabouts, now, do you think of looking for this boarding-house?"

"Well, if you prefer London, I should think it would be easy enough to find one in some suitable neighbourhood," replied Madame Mirabel; "Hackney, for instance, or somewhere near Victoria Park, or, if you preferred a more central situation, there's Burton Crescent. Any one would be an improvement on Stockwell. If I were you,

I think I should prefer a country town, or some quiet sea-side place. Or you might even live abroad, if you cared to. There are plenty of nice cheerful places in Germany, now, where you could make your money go a long way—places, you know, where there are nice promenades, and bands, and public gardens. My own impression is that that would suit you best of all."

"I'm not so sure o' that," replied Mrs. Jickling warily. The fact was that the suggestions made by Madame Mirabel were not altogether unwelcome to her, for in spite of the rank and fashion into which she had been introduced she was beginning to feel somewhat at a disadvantage in her daughter's house. Julia was 'that masterful,' as she expressed it; and Mrs. Jickling, who loved position and authority, found more pleasure in patronising than in being patronised. Besides, one certainly could live very cheaply in Germany, and present quite a figure on a hundred pounds a year. But of course

it would not do to give too ready an assent.

"I'm not so sure o' that," she repeated, assuming a dissatisfied air. "Folks eats their victuals raw in Germany, so I've 'eard tell, and I couldn't stomach that, Julia, nohow. You wouldn't like it yourself, you know, but of course it's good enough for your mother," she added with an aggrieved sniff.

"Stuff and nonsense," said Madame Mirabel somewhat brusquely. "The food in Germany is particularly good and plentiful —better, a great deal, than what you have had to put up with hitherto in London. Tell me, now—how much money have you left? What can you reckon upon, safely, every year?"

"Well," said Mrs. Jickling, "what with my bit of pension, and one or two other trifles—a share or two here and there—I should say it was a matter of about fifty pound."

"Fifty pounds a year," repeated Madame

Mirabel. "Very good. Now in Germany you can live for four marks a day, and live well too. That comes to, say, seventy-five pounds a year in round numbers. Now I propose to make up the difference, and add something over for extras. Of course you'll require pocket-money, you know, for caps and gloves and such things. That is the best I can do for you, and I recommend you to think it over carefully."

"Well, we'll talk about it when I get back from London," said Mrs. Jickling, who had privately made up her mind to accept the offer. "It's a serious thing, though, a woman leaving her own country at my time o' life. One 'ud think I was an Irish emigrant. However, we'll say no more about it now. When do the trains run up to town?"

Madame Mirabel, who saw that she had virtually carried her point, fetched a time-table, and gave her mother full particulars of the service. Of course the sale of the furniture would keep Mrs. Jickling in

London for four or five days at least, and this time Madame Mirabel intended to turn to the fullest possible advantage. In the first place, she hoped to institute such enquiries with regard to *pensions* in Germany —for it would be an excellent thing if she could once get her mother settled definitely somewhere out of England —as would enable her to propose some particular establishment in some particular town to Mrs. Jickling as soon as she returned; in the second place, the spell of freedom to which she was looking forward would indeed be thrown away if she suffered it to pass without another interview with the man she loved. It can scarcely be said that Madame Mirabel's ideas of right and wrong were confused. The strange thing about her was that she denied, or ignored, the existence of either as such. She recognised no law, no standard, no ideal. Duty, in her eyes, was simply that course of action which was prompted by a combination of natural bias and expediency; by Truth,

she understood only the resultant of a process in logic or mathematics; God, to her, was nothing more than the deification of a concept. And yet she felt that, under different circumstances, she might be able to regard herself with greater complacency than she did under prevailing conditions. Just as Mrs. Rawdon Crawley thought how easy it must be to be good with five thousand a year, so did Madame Mirabel think it possible that her own conduct or character might assimilate itself more to popular criteria of goodness could the one great longing of her life be gratified. Her love for Lancaster was pure, and deep, and strong. He was the one man she had ever met whom she could reverence and look up to. Hers was no vulgar passion. She would have scorned to be the object of a vulgar passion herself, and she was incapable of cherishing it towards another. But her love was none the less intense, none the less importunate, none the less tyrannical, because so austerely pure. And

she knew that her very life depended upon the success of her great endeavour.

She was looking calm enough, two days afterwards, when Lancaster, in obedience to her summons, joined her in the drawing-room. Who could have suspected the tempest that was raging in her breast? Not he, for one. She gave him her hand with a bright, brief smile of welcome, and motioned him to a seat.

"You're looking far from well," he said, regarding her with some concern. "I shall have to prescribe for you, I'm afraid. Are you suffering in any way?"

"If anybody else had asked me that, I should have entered an unqualified plea of not guilty," she replied in a low voice; "but to you I don't mind admitting that my nerves are out of order, and that I sleep badly."

"I'm sorry," said Lancaster, "to hear that. We must see what a course of bromides will do for you. It often happens that the effects

of a great shock are not felt immediately, and people who bear up so wonderfully while troubles last are brought to book afterwards. Your mother is staying with you, I believe?"

"I wanted to speak to you about my mother," replied Madame Mirabel. "It is as well that I should tell you frankly that—well, that in her younger days she had not many educational advantages. In fact my father was rather cut by his family when he married her. However, they got on together well enough, and she was always a good mother to me. He was killed in one of our little wars in Afghanistan, you know. Well, my mother has just lost the principal part of her income, and now the question is what is to be done with her. I'm afraid she had set her heart upon coming to live with me. That is out of the question. It would be good for neither of us. My own proposal is that a home should be found for her in some nice cheerful place in Germany, and I

broached it to her the other day—not without some prospect of success. You see living there is both good and cheap, and I could always run over and see her when I felt inclined."

"Quite so, quite so," assented Lancaster, nodding slightly. "The idea seems to me excellent in every way."

"Of course I knew that you must have heard about my mother's arrival," continued Madame Mirabel, "and I therefore wanted to tell you exactly the position of affairs. The greatest nonsense, I believe, has been talked outside, and I dare say that some of it may have reached you."

"Your mother is still with you, I believe?" asked Lancaster.

"She is in town just now," replied Madame Mirabel; "she went up the other day to see about selling off her furniture, and so on, and I don't expect her back before the end of the week. There'll be time enough then to settle her future plans. And now tell me

about yourself. How are you, and what have you been about?"

"Working, to be sure," he answered with a laugh. "Trying on one hand to convince a few healthy persons that they really have nothing the matter with them, and on the other to persuade some who are actually ill that if they don't attend to directions they'll place themselves beyond my power altogether. Every doctor, I suppose, has those two classes among his patients. I'm beginning to believe that the only way to treat some people is to work upon their imaginations."

"That ought not to be difficult," remarked Madame Mirabel. "Most people in the world can be made to believe anything."

"Cynic!" laughed Lancaster. "My study of human nature has resulted in gentler thoughts. But candidly, are we not all of us more or less under the influence of imagination? It is a great power in life, believe

me. Much that passes with us for reality is imagination and nothing more—and affects us in exact proportion to our capacity for distinguishing its true character."

She shot a glance at him, as though he had unwittingly touched a chord.

"You'll find it is so, if you think it over," he said, with confidence. "There are few more interesting subjects of study than illusions, whether sensational, psychological, mnemonic, or what you will. There are illusions of insight as well as of eye-sight"——

"Ah!" cried Madame Mirabel faintly. "Yes, I believe that—I believe that. And they all have a physical basis—they are all individual and subjective. It is when the subject of them believes in their objectivity that insanity begins. It is always well to remember that."

Lancaster looked at her a little curiously. "You are the unlikeliest person I ever knew to be the subject of illusions," he remarked,

with a pleasant smile. "You're too level-headed for that sort of trouble, I should say. But apropos of illusions, you've heard, no doubt, that poor old Mrs. Palliser is gone?"

"Old Mrs. Palliser!" exclaimed Madame Mirabel. "No, indeed I had not heard it. It must have been very sudden, wasn't it?"

"It was sudden," he replied. "I was there at the time; we were all chatting together by the fire over our tea, when Mrs. Palliser discovered almost accidentally, so to speak, that the old lady was dead. She died in her sleep, in fact, quite quietly and without pain."

"How strange I should not have known!" said Madame Mirabel. "Then she never recovered her mind, I suppose? There was no lucid interval before death?"

"No, I fancy not," said Lancaster. "I never had any hope of her recovery, and no one could have had a more perfectly easy death; but of course the suddenness of it

was a great shock to the Pallisers. She's to be buried the day after to-morrow, I believe."

"Well, let us have some tea," suggested Madame Mirabel, rousing herself after a thoughtful pause. Lancaster immediately got up and touched the bell; then, instead of resuming his seat, he sauntered to the book-case, and began to con over the titles of the books. "What an omnivorous reader you are!" he exclaimed, as he took down one volume after another and glanced rapidly across its pages. "Vogt, Büchner, Schopenhauer, Hartmann—oh, shocking; why do you read such morbid stuff as this? 'The Philosophy of the Unconscious,' indeed—'Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung'—'Die Nichtigkeit des Lebens'—oh, this will never do. Schopenhauer was a diseased man, and everything he wrote bore the taint of its author's distemper. Talk of illusions, forsooth! — Bain — Maudsley — Andrew Wilson—G. H. Lewes—Spencer *of course*—

Darwin—A. R. Wallace—come now, that's better — Haeckel — h'm — M'Cosh's 'Intuitions'—yes, that's good—and—let me see—one, two, three, four, *five* books on hypnotism! Well, that is an unexpected wind-up. How long have you taken to studying hypnotism, pray, Madame Mirabel?"

She had been lying back in her chair, watching him with infinite amusement as he pulled her books about and criticised her taste. The familiarity of the proceeding delighted her, and suggested a pleasurable and welcome train of thought to which she abandoned herself without restraint. Lancaster's last remark, however, seemed to jar her nerves. A shadow passed over her face, and for a moment she looked embarrassed and annoyed.

"Oh, I take an interest in most things, you know," she replied with assumed carelessness. "The phenomena ascribed to hypnotism open up a very curious field of speculation, and I have often wanted to find

out what place they are destined to occupy in pathological science. Any new manifestation of natural force, I think, is worth studying."

Lancaster raised his eyebrows with a puzzled look. "Well, I hope you won't pursue your researches into the sphere of practice or experiment," he said, as he replaced the book he had been glancing at upon the shelf. "Hypnotism is like a powerful drug—potent for good, but in some applications a very deadly poison. What's this? Oh, I see—our friend Comte. I'll tell you what, Madame Mirabel, your library wants leavening a bit."

"I knew you'd think that," she answered smiling.

"You should read Flint," continued Lancaster. "I'll send you round something of his in a day or two. You should read Flint, and Hegel, and Lilly, and Emerson, and James Martineau—your mind runs too much in one groove, and that's bad for you.

Suppose you put yourself under my direction for a change ? "

" I'll read anything you tell me to," she said, a sense of new happiness stealing over her.

" That's right," he answered, resuming his seat by the fire. " I scarcely expected to find you so manageable. It's the greatest mistake in the world to read nothing but books on one side of a question. You remember Toinette's ironical recommendation to Argan that he should poke out one of his eyes in order to see better with the other ? Well, that's an allegory."

" I stand convicted," laughed Madame Mirabel. " And now let me give you some tea. Yes, I dare say one is apt, rather, to get into a groove. But after all, doesn't it save one from bewilderment, or at least confusion ? There are so many points of view, you know, each producing its own system so naturally and so logically that the fair-minded person finds himself in a perfect maze unless he adopts one and then adheres

to it. I can conceive a dozen systems, each apparently complete in itself, but all hopelessly irreconcileable with one another because based on a dozen different standpoints; where, then, is the use of familiarising one's self with so many? Life is too short by far. I prefer to choose my standpoint to begin with, and then go straight on wherever the road may lead me. To be continually vacillating and oscillating from side to side as some do—I would as soon spend my time running round and round in a circle. Such a method leads no one anywhere."

"And if your straight line suddenly comes to an end?" asked Lancaster smiling, as he stirred his tea.

"How do you mean?"

"Well—supposing it lands you in a contradiction, or a manifest absurdity, or a conclusion plainly at variance with facts," he replied.

"In that case, always supposing I had not strayed from the road, I should turn back and

try another direction, convinced that I had taken the wrong way at the outset," answered Madame Mirabel. "I may have to do it yet—I cannot tell. But I candidly don't think it's likely."

"I am sure you would be honest enough to acknowledge it, if ever your views did change," said Lancaster.

"I think I should," she replied. "I fancy sometimes that beliefs are very much a matter of temperament, even with the most strong-minded. How different we always were in that respect—Gaston and I. We never saw alike."

"No, I suppose not," said Lancaster thoughtfully.

Madame Mirabel hesitated a moment or two, in case he might have something to add. He said nothing further, however, and she went on,—

"Do you remember that curious theory of his about the existence and survival of what he called his 'mind-body'?"

"Yes, certainly," answered Lancaster.

"What is your own opinion?" she asked, with more anxiety than she cared to show.

"Well, I always thought it an ingenious hypothesis," he replied; "not to be accepted as proved, of course, but affording a certain basis for investigation. I've never considered it very much, however; I've been thinking more of *him*."

"Ah, yes," she said in a low voice.

"I believe in the continuation of life after death," he went on, "though what the conditions of such an existence may be I cannot of course guess. But if this life were all, the universe would be a failure as regards every individual born into it; and I altogether reject the notion that the Power who has brought us into being intends to put us to permanent intellectual confusion."

"And where do you suppose Gaston now is?" she asked, with a strange thrill running through her.

"How can I tell?" he replied. "In

Saturn, perhaps, or Mars. Or he may never have left the earth. Perhaps he's in this very room—now, while we are speaking."

"Oh, hush!" she exclaimed. "No, no; all that is a dream. It cannot be. It is opposed to all scientific analogy, this belief in the persistence of individual consciousness. Come, let us talk of more practical matters. I think I've heard you say you have a good memory. Do you remember where you were just seven years ago?"

"Seven years ago?" repeated Lancaster with a smile. "Let me see. No, I don't think I do. Why?"

"I remember very well," said Madame Mirabel, lying back in her chair and gazing dreamily into the fire.

"What—where *I* was?" he asked, laughing.

She nodded slowly without looking at him, and smiled too, a little.

"Well?"

"On board the *Mirzapore*, in the Red Sea," she answered. "We had travelled together from Southampton; have you forgotten? I was with those people—the Leslies, you know—on my way out to the East."

"Yes, that is true. Is it only seven years ago? It seems an age," said Lancaster.

"I enjoyed that voyage very much," she continued. "It was the first time I had ever been out of Europe, and everything was fresh and interesting. I was going out as governess in the family of the Belgian Minister, you know, and it was there that I first met Gaston."

"True, true," said Lancaster. "How much has happened since! It seems as though we are different persons now from what we were then. I little thought we should ever meet each other again."

"It was a pleasant time—a very pleasant time," continued Madame Mirabel in the

same musing tone. "I remember how I used to enjoy leaning over the taffrail at night and watching the phosphorescence. And some of the people were so delightfully amusing, too. I was sorry when we reached Colombo."

"Ah, we separated at Colombo, to be sure," said Lancaster, falling into the retrospective mood. "Yes, it seemed quite a break-up, didn't it? It's wonderful how intimate people often get at sea, though on that particular voyage I, for one, made very few acquaintances."

"Do you know what they used to call you on board?" asked Madame Mirabel, with a slight, mischievous smile.

"Call *me?*" repeated Lancaster, laughing. "What, do you mean a nickname? No, indeed I don't; I had no idea I'd been so highly honoured. What was it, pray?"

"They called you 'The Master of Ravenswood,'" she replied, glancing at him as she spoke.

"Really," exclaimed Lancaster, much amused. "Well, I was quite unconscious of it. But why 'The Master of Ravenswood'?"

"It was some silly girl who started it," replied Madame Mirabel. "I suppose it was because you were tall and dark, and had a melancholy air, and scarcely spoke to any one. You *were* very reserved, you know. I believe we were almost the only people you ever condescended to associate with."

"Ah," said Lancaster briefly, a shadow coming over his face. "Yes, I dare say that's true enough. I was not in tune with society just then."

Madame Mirabel looked enquiringly at him, but said nothing. Lancaster himself continued silent for some moments, and appeared lost in thought. At last he said,—

"I'm not much given to talking about myself, and it was scarcely likely that I should take chance passengers on board

a mail-steamer into my confidence. But I need have no reserves from you, situated as we are now. The plain truth is this. I had just suffered the most crushing sorrow that can fall to the lot of man, and had left England in hopes of recovering my equilibrium."

"Is that so really?" exclaimed Madame Mirabel softly. "Of course I had no idea of such a thing. I am grieved to hear it, although it is so long ago."

Lancaster rose from his chair, and stood with his back to the fire, leaning against the mantelpiece. All his cheerfulness seemed to have vanished; he looked stern and sorrowful.

"I may as well tell you about it," he said, gravely. "There is no reason why I shouldn't. It was in the month of March that we found ourselves fellow-passengers upon the *Mirzapore*. Just three years previously I had become engaged to be married."

Madame Mirabel drew a quick, short breath.

"I need not dwell upon the intensity of the affection which existed between us," Lancaster continued in a half-stifled voice. "No sympathy could have been more complete; we were like one soul. Indeed, I can scarcely remember making her a formal offer of marriage; we became betrothed to each other intuitively, as it were —almost without being conscious of the fact. At that time I was poor, and had still my career to make. It was impossible to marry at once. Of course this was a trial, but common enough. We had to wait our chance like other people, and that period of waiting, which I then thought so intolerable, I now look back upon as the happiest portion of my life."

Clever woman as she was, Madame Mirabel had never for a moment taken into consideration the possibility of there having been a romance in Lancaster's past.

Strange, that such a thing should never have occurred to her! His was no virgin heart, then. He had already loved; had lost also, apparently—which was something; but how if the love were not dead? A rush of bitter jealousy—for there is such a thing as retrospective jealousy—came over her, coupled with fear. She could frame no words, and simply waited in silence.

"The happiest portion of my life," he repeated, slowly. "It was brightened by her constant companionship, and by the prospect of still greater happiness eventually. Yes, those were golden days. And they grew even brighter towards the end, for by an unexpected stroke of good fortune I was appointed one of the house-surgeons to a certain newly-opened hospital in the immediate neighbourhood. This was a great step for me. We had known each other then for nearly four years, and had been engaged for about three. Now it really looked as though our long probation was at an end.

I had a trifle of money of my own, and so had she; and now came this appointment, which was likely to lead to something better before long. The question of our immediate marriage was mooted. It would have been a risk, of course,—and there were the objections of friends on both sides to be overcome. At last we determined to venture it.

"I left her house after the decision had been come to scarcely believing in my own happiness. We were to be married in a week, and nothing would content me but going to buy the wedding-ring at once. How well I remember the little jeweller's-shop in the country town, and my own nervousness as I made the purchase! And yet it seems centuries ago. Well, I began my new duties the next day, and was too busy to go to see her again. The work delighted me, for I took the deepest interest in it, and felt I could acquit myself satisfactorily. You may judge if I didn't think

myself the luckiest dog on earth! Then—the day after—I was in my own room—when an attendant came and called me. A new case had been brought in—an accident—and I was wanted. I caught up one or two instruments, and followed the messenger into the accident ward. It was a lady. She was lying on a bed. I did not see her face at first. Then I went up to her—and looked."

Lancaster paused abruptly.

"It was she," he resumed, in an almost inaudible tone. "And she was quite dead. She had been knocked down by a runaway horse, and killed upon the spot."

"How unutterably shocking!" ejaculated Madame Mirabel, really startled.

"There was only one thing that saved my reason," said Lancaster. "The agony was too keen to last uninterruptedly; and there came into my mind the serious suggestion of suicide. It seemed to me impossible that any one—God, devil, or man—could

really wish that I should continue to endure the awful anguish that had come upon me. If I were to kill myself, I argued, I should either put an end to it altogether, or I might have a chance of rejoining my dear one in whatever state or sphere she might be. The consideration comforted me, and afforded me the pause, the relief, I required. Well, that helped me to live through it, somehow. I did not succumb to the temptation. I hesitated, and in the course of hesitation I began to regain my self-control. Meanwhile she was moved to her father's house, and in the delirium of my love I swore I would marry her yet. On her dead finger, as she lay in her coffin, I placed the ring I had bought, and vowed that I would be faithful to her for ever."

For some minutes Madame Mirabel said nothing. Her mind was in a turmoil. A wild storm of the most passionate jealousy swept over her, and deprived her of all power of utterance. And a terrible dread,

too, held her dumb. Had she, after all, a rival—a rival who, though dead for years, was still more powerful than she? Against such an adversary, one who yet held the fortress she was besieging, who could wrestle? It was a bitter and humiliating moment. Then she rose, and drew near to where he stood.

"I only wonder you survived it," she said quietly. "I cannot say how deeply I sympathise with you—how much I admire you for your fortitude. And it was then that you left England?"

Lancaster nodded. "Of course I could not continue in the hospital. I resigned my post, and through the kindness of friends I obtained temporary employment in Madras. I was on my way there when I fell in with you."

"Ah!" she said under her breath.

"I have never been the same man since," he resumed. "It revolutionised me altogether — my character, my opinions, my

views of life. Work was a difficult affair at first, but eventually it proved my salvation. I now live for nothing else."

"I am glad you have told me this," said Madame Mirabel after a pause. "I know you better now than I did before. It makes me feel more truly than ever your friend."

"We can sympathise with each other," he said, taking her hand with that rare smile which is so different from the smile of ordinary cheerfulness. "We are companions in sorrow, for we have both suffered. I was so glad when I heard that you were living here. It was an additional reason for taking over the practice. If only I could have been of greater use to you!"

Madame Mirabel had no desire to follow the train of thought suggested in the last sentence. "You are of use to every one," she said, "and more especially to me. But don't say you live for nothing but work. I do not say that such a life is anything but noble, but surely work is only part of life—

surely life is broad enough to take in more than that. There may be possibilities of happiness in store for you even yet, and it is not good to remain in bondage to the past for ever. Don't you think so, yourself?"

He looked at her, for a moment, thoughtfully. "Perhaps so," he replied. "In any case, believe me that your friendship is very dear to me. And now I think I must be going."

She did not seek to detain him. In fact she rather longed to be alone. She wanted to think over all he had been telling her, to study the new conditions which the story of his life had opened up, to try and discover exactly how far her own prospects might be affected by what she now knew. It might prove a death-blow to her hopes; it might prove a powerful instrument in her hand for increasing her ascendancy over him. All this required thought.

"You must let me come in again soon," he said in his ordinary tone, as he prepared

to leave. "Nothing rests me so much as a cup of tea and a chat. By the way, will you let me take away this book? I should like to dip into it a bit. I'll send you on Flint and one or two more to-morrow."

He took a volume from the shelf, tucked it under his arm, and pressed her hand warmly. The next moment she was alone.

She sank into the chair from which she had just risen, and fell into a profound reverie. The room was almost dark now; a slight radiance, however, came from the fire, and she was too much preoccupied to ring for lights. Her first sensations were those of jealousy, pure and simple. It tortured her to think that Lancaster's heart had ever been given to another woman. Love is strong as death, and jealousy cruel as the grave; she felt no pity for the girl who had been killed on the eve of her long-expected marriage—rather, indeed, a fierce joy, a vindictive satisfaction, in the thought that by her removal the man had been set free. But none the

less did the fact of his early love for some one else lacerate her like a whip; and the smart of it was intensified by the suspicion, the dread, lest his heart should be still buried in the girl's grave. He was probably not an easy subject to impress. He was no ordinary 'marrying man,' ready and even eager to 'console himself,' as the phrase goes, for the loss of one by accepting the advances of another. No, he would have to be handled very tenderly, very skilfully. Still, the chances of victory were not small. She had no living rival, at any rate. As far as she knew, he had very few friends at all; certainly no intimates; none who occupied so near and so confidential a position towards him as she herself. She recalled his last words, and dwelt upon them avidly. Her friendship, he had said, was 'very dear' to him. He had told her the story of his life, and had told it to no one else. Such friendship, such confidence, might surely be fanned into love. Might? It should be, it must be. She had

paid her price, and she would have the value of it.

The shadows deepened, and still she sat there, thinking, thinking, thinking. Nearly an hour passed. How dares the bad soul turn in upon itself, and look face to face upon its own deformity? And yet this woman shrank not from the sight, but surveyed it with a calm indifference, a calculating, cold impartiality divorced from the faintest semblance of moral sensitiveness. She experienced no revulsion, no uneasiness even, when her thoughts turned backward, and, leaving the problems of her future, rehearsed the dreadful tragedy of six months before. *Gaston had to die*, and he died. That was the condition of her liberty, of the crowning of her hopes, of the gratification of her love. It was with him now as though he had never been. Of what, then, should she repent?

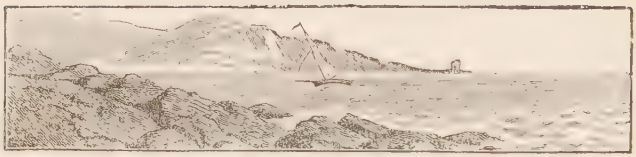
Gradually, as she sat there, she became conscious of a strange chill stealing down her

spine. She shivered slightly, and mechanically drew her chair a little nearer to the fire; then a faint sound as it were of sighing perplexed her ears, and she felt a certain oppression in her breath. The room was now almost entirely dark. What was happening? As we have already said, she was not a nervous woman; but here was an indication that the familiar and now dreaded influences were again coming upon her from without, and, strengthening and intensifying every minute, might eventually gain the mastery over her. For a moment she felt tempted to ring the bell. She tried to do so, in fact, but some unseen power seemed to intervene, and she found herself unable to move. Then a crawling, deadly, horrible sensation crept over her, curdling her blood and paralysing the natural action of her brain. She made a violent effort to resist it. She endeavoured to fix her thoughts on some indifferent subject, the contemplation of which would involve a strong mental exertion. The

alleged intuitiveness of the idea of motion had recently been interesting her, and she attempted to go over the arguments *pro* and *con*. She had also been dipping into a treatise of Lobatschewsky's on Transcendental Geometry, and she now tried to force herself into meditating upon the aberration of parallaxes as accounted for by the hypothetical curvature of space. A wholesome diversion, truly, if it had been possible! But it was not possible. She was foiled, beaten, overcome. A dreadful impression pervaded her mind that, since she had been left alone, something had entered the room. At last she could bear it no longer. With a tremendous effort she staggered to her feet and turned round, staring, in speechless horror, into the corner opposite to where she stood. There, gradually assuming shape out of the obscurity, stood the figure of a man. And its hollow, stern, reproachful eyes gazed at her till they seemed to burn into her very soul.

Human nature could hold out no longer, and with a piercing shriek the woman fell prone upon the carpet in a swoon.

It was Dr. Mirabel.



CHAPTER III.

MADAME MIRABEL GIVES ADVICE.

THE legacy bequeathed to him by the old lady now deceased was a source of very natural and sincere gratification to Gerard. It would be unjust to say that his dependence hitherto upon his parents had ever galled him; and still wider of the truth that he loved money for money's sake. At the same time the notion of being 'independent' was as sweet to him as it is to everybody, and vision after vision arose within him of how he would shape his life. He had now no longer any need to work for a living, and, should he wish to travel, he could do so without asking his father for

a penny. But nothing was further from his mind than any wish to idle. His brain was too active for that. No, he still longed to work—to do something and to make himself somebody—and whatever he did must be something fraught with usefulness to his fellow-creatures. Many of the schemes which presented themselves to his reflection were Utopian enough, no doubt. The elevation of the masses—the correction of prevalent error (for the dreams of authorship came upon him now in forceful and fascinating shapes)—the alleviation of suffering—the pursuit of speculative truth—all these and other projects passed in turn before him, and occupied his mind with a sort of pleasurable embarrassment. It must be confessed that he gave only a passing thought to the Leper Settlement in Saghalien. Surely he might do good and useful work in the world without so tremendous a sacrifice. He was scarcely called upon to risk his life, particularly at this especial juncture when the world

offered so wide and so attractive a field for his newly-awakened energies. It would be unwise, he reasoned, to aim too high. He could scarcely feel sure that he was of the stuff of which martyrs were made. No—the world had suddenly grown too bright, too beautiful, too attractive, to be given up just now. He longed to see more of it, to learn more about it, now that he had the chance. It was to be his field of labour, and he would not too hastily choose one corner of it—and that the hardest and remotest corner, too. At any rate, he would do nothing without advice.

And whom should he ask to advise him? His parents, dear, good souls, understood him not at all. Their ideals were as different from his as the poles from the equator. To make plenty of money easily and respectably, to observe the conventionalities, never to do anything or be anything that other people did not or were not, to wear a tall hat and well-fitting clothes, to go

to church on Sundays and believe everything the preacher said, to read nice, proper, commonplace books with no disturbing 'new' ideas in them, and to marry a nice, proper, commonplace young lady like Rosie Chattering without any ideas at all—that was what his parents would naturally wish their son to do. And it was precisely what Gerard vowed he never would do and never would attempt to do. Besides which, his father would no doubt give him very dangerous advice about the investment of his new fortune. Four per cent. was a poor return, after all, and good Mr. Palliser, had he had the handling of it, would have immediately sold out and invested the proceeds in some bran-new and very speculative enterprise—some wonderful invention, or manufacture, or industrial undertaking of the technicalities of which he was profoundly ignorant himself, but which would yield ten or even fifteen per cent. upon the capital—on paper. No, he would not take his parents

into counsel. Lancaster would be a safer guide than they. He would probably advise Gerard to adopt one of the professions—medicine or law—and to go in for it with the earnest, concentrated will of a man who has his own way to make in the world, his own fortune to carve. Such advice would be undoubtedly excellent; and yet Gerard could scarcely bring himself at once to the idea of being either a doctor or a lawyer, or indeed of setting such a limit to his activity as the adoption of any specific, money-making craft. His mind was in too fluid a state at present to take so definite a direction, for the unpractical side of his father's character had really been inherited by Gerard himself, though, as it reappeared in a somewhat different form, he failed to recognize it as such. It was now that he thought of Madame Mirabel. She, at any rate, would understand him; and, understanding him, would be able to point out the very path for him to follow.

His reflections here grew complicated.

There was now no reason, from a worldly standpoint, why he should not offer himself to her at once. He had a comfortable little sum in ready money, and three hundred pounds a year; she had almost half as much again, which would bring their united incomes up to very nearly eight hundred pounds. Certainly, he was no bad match for her so far; if only she could be got to regard him in the desired light! That was the weak point. He felt that she was necessary to him, but was by no means so sure that he was necessary to her. She had the strength, the matured will, the definiteness of aim, that he lacked; but what had he to offer her in return? Nothing but admiration, and unbounded confidence, and what he believed was love. Very likely she did not care for such things, did not value them, had never felt her need of them. And now he told himself that everything must depend upon her decision. His whole future life rested in her hands.

Such were the thoughts that revolved in his mind the day after his grandmother's funeral, as he was strolling quietly through Whitmore Bottom. It was a bright, mild, exquisite April day—one of those days of heaven upon earth that beguile the least sanguine of us into a delusion that the fair spring weather has really set in at last, and that there will be no more snow, no more east winds, no more nipping frosts. The day, in fact, was an emblem of Gerard's own mind. The sudden, unexpected gleam of prosperity that had come into his life had melted the frosts and brightened the gloom of his constitutional pessimism, and as he sauntered along through the sweet air he began to realize the fact that life might prove worth living after all. And yet it was ordained that the air he was inhaling with such enjoyment should not continue genial and balmy until the summer-time. There was yet to be a break; April was to have more than one snowstorm, and even May its

share of bitter winds, and sprinklings of morning ice, and frowning, gloomy skies.

"My whole future rests in her hands," he repeated to himself, musingly; and as the thought passed through him he looked up, and saw the woman herself. She was advancing slowlier than was her wont, and as she approached it was impossible for Gerard not to notice how thin, and haggard, and pale she looked. It seemed, to her, indeed, as though her long agony had almost reached its crisis. For months she had fought and struggled against the incessant but undefinable terrors which assailed her. For months she had been true to her creed, and refused to acknowledge even to herself the objective reality of those unseen influences. She had immersed herself in books, she had surrounded herself with such society as the place afforded, she had concentrated her thoughts upon the one great scheme of her life—the acquisition of the hand of Lancaster. But it was all to no purpose. *She*

had seen her murdered husband. Her psychological knowledge assured her that the appearance was no more than an hallucination, but there was something within her that contradicted that. The suspicion grew stronger and stronger that the Theory *he* had held and cherished might be a true one, and that her own materialism was a gigantic error. And she felt that the dead man was more powerful than she, that he had been working against her all the time, that retribution was coming fast upon her, and that her eventual defeat was sure. Yet she never swerved from her purpose. She told herself over and over again that no physical weakness of hers, no shadowy wraith from the unseen world, should stand between her and Lancaster. Let her but preserve her reason, and she would have her will in spite of everything. The conviction of Gaston's superior power was instantly met by the determination that she would resist it to the uttermost, and fight a hand-to-hand battle

with her terrible and relentless enemy to the very death.

It had been some time before she awoke from her swoon, and although she went to bed immediately and took a composing draught, the shock to her system proved severe. Nothing but her iron will could have carried her through the hours that supervened. Then a thought struck her, and she sent a verbal message to Lancaster that she was ill. He came round during the forenoon, and was shocked at her appearance—prescribed rest, sleep, change of air, and so on. She told him of her seizure and the sensations which had preceded it, but did not touch upon the catastrophe which had caused it. He looked grave, though not uneasy; said something about nervous exhaustion and want of tone, and suspected functional derangement of the heart. "You must put yourself entirely into my hands," he said, and she vowed that nothing would please her better. It was a double salvation

that she now sought in the protection of Lancaster; not only could he and he alone satisfy the cravings of her love, but he alone could save her from the vengeance of the dead. No shadowy form however threatening could harm her while he was by. For the first time in her life she felt powerless single-handed. It was more than ever necessary, now, that her enterprise should succeed.

His manner to her on this occasion had betrayed unusual tenderness. It touched him to see this brilliant, self-reliant creature prostrate, confiding, and so strangely soft. His heart beat ever so little faster as he bent over her and felt her pulse, and she, glancing up at him, promised obedience to his injunctions. Gradually he felt the fascination of her stealing over him. He promised to see her again the following day, and left regretfully.

"I am glad to have met you," said Madame Mirabel, as she held out her hand

to Gerard. "There, never mind—I know what you're going to say. I know I'm looking ill. The fact is I've *been* ill, but am feeling better to-day, and have come out to see what a little exercise and fresh air will do for me."

"I'm very sorry to hear that," returned Gerard. "You've not been looking well for a long time. Don't you think it would be wiser"——

"Now I'm not going to talk about myself," she interrupted with a smile. "Tell me about your own affairs. I was so shocked to hear the other day of what had occurred. Wasn't it terribly sudden?"

They had stopped for a moment or two as they exchanged greetings, and now began to walk slowly on again, Gerard having turned into the same direction as Madame Mirabel. The meeting was as pleasant to him as it was unexpected; and he prepared to open his whole heart to her.

"You mean about my grandmother," he

replied, slowly. "Yes — it was sudden enough. She died in her sleep, sitting in front of the window in the drawing-room. Of course she had been growing weaker for months past, and we all knew she couldn't live long. But we none of us expected the end to come when it did."

"It must have been a great shock," observed Madame Mirabel sympathetically. "The funeral was to be yesterday, I believe?"

"Yes—she was buried yesterday," said Gerard.

A pause ensued, during which Gerard tried to brace himself for what he had to say. His constitutional reserve began to lay hold of him, and he felt an embarrassing reluctance to speak. But the impression was strong upon him that now and now only was the time.

"There's something I want to tell you and consult you about," he said at last, with an effort. "The fact is that the death of my

grandmother has made a great difference in my—position."

"Yes?" exclaimed Madame Mirabel with interest.

"She has left me three hundred a year, besides a certain sum of ready money," pursued Gerard, a warm flush mounting to his brow.

"Really!" ejaculated Madame Mirabel. "Well, I congratulate you warmly. I am sincerely glad to hear it. I know few persons in the world likely to make a better use of such a competency than you. And it will give you independence—one of the greatest boons in life. You will be your own master now."

"Yes," he said, in a musing tone. "That is what I value it for. I feel that I can shape my life as I like. But then comes the difficulty. How am I to shape it? What is the best thing I can do? That is the question I have been asking myself ever since I knew the provisions of the will, and I have not yet found an answer."

Madame Mirabel looked thoughtful. "No doubt, it is not a matter easy to decide off-hand," she said after a pause, "nor is it a matter that should be so decided. Don't be in a hurry ; wait, and the solution will come of itself. There could not be a greater mistake than to act precipitately in such a case. A Fabian policy is the best you can adopt just now."

"I was just on the point of asking your advice," said Gerard smiling, "and you have anticipated me. Of course it would be imprudent to come to any premature decision ; still, I can't help thinking about it, and wondering what I shall do. All my ideas are vague, and I want them put in some concrete shape. It's no use consulting my parents — they don't understand me, and never did. But you do understand me, I think. I want an object in life. Try and find me one, and you'll do me a most invaluable service."

"Well," said Madame Mirabel, adapting

herself to his mood. "Let us see first what your capital consists of—what you have to work with, in fact. It appears to me that your assets may be divided under three heads: you have money (that is, independence), brains, and, I *think*, energy. Is that not so? Well," as he smiled rather uneasily, "we'll say latent, or potential, energy. It is true I've never seen you very energetic hitherto, but we'll allow for argument's sake that you can be energetic if you like. Now the first question to be decided is, whether you want to make more money, or whether you are satisfied with what you have?"

"That's easily answered," said Gerard; "I'm perfectly satisfied with what I have, and don't want to make a penny more."

"Well, then," replied Madame Mirabel, "I think that if I were you I should see what I could do in the way of authorship. You have literary tastes, and can afford to write without depending on your exertions for an income. Choose some special subject

—the literature of some particular age and country, for instance; study it, read it up, saturate yourself with it, make it your own, and then begin to write about it. That is a suggestion which may lead to others, even if you don't adopt it. Or there's science. Take up physics. What can be more enthralling than a research into the very nature of matter itself? It goes to the very root of things, and penetrates more deeply than any other study into the profoundest mysteries of existence. I can conceive no grander subject. The science of physics contains the key to *everything*. When we once understand the nature which underlies and informs the ultimate elements of matter, we shall be on the high road to the knowledge of everything there is to be known. Controversies will be at an end, and superstition a thing of the past. You say you want an object in life? Well, there is one for you. I cannot suggest a better."

Gerard paused a moment or two. "I

have only one remark to offer," he said hesitatingly. "The very feature about the things you suggest that prompts you to recommend them to me is in itself an objection. You speak of them as attractive. That is just what I am afraid of. They are too attractive. What is the moral value of a pursuit that one enjoys? I see in such a life nothing but a sort of refined selfishness. I might make no end of wonderful discoveries in either literature or science, but who would be practically benefited? While I was enjoying myself, others would still be suffering in one way or another; I shouldn't benefit those whom I might be helping, neither should I be doing anything of the slightest moral value to myself. Give me some more useful task than these."

Madame Mirabel turned toward him with a look of undisguised amusement. "A philanthropist?" she exclaimed with a light laugh. "Nay, then you have come to the wrong person. I should say that the rector,

now, might prove an apter counsellor. No doubt he would be delighted with your assistance. I believe he has a night-school somewhere—and a blanket-club, or something of the sort, and various other institutions for the purveyance of creature comforts to the poor of his flock. If that is the kind of thing you're thinking of, you'll find an ample field for your operations anywhere."

"You don't really mean what you say," protested Gerard, feeling sore. "A man may surely do some good in the world without participating in parochial charities. No—the only thing that has really occurred to me as practicable is work among the poorer class of artisans. I don't mean slumming, exactly, but something like it. I should like to do something to brighten their homes, and enlighten their minds, and bring a little intellectual interest and activity into their lives generally. There are such numbers of people in the world who simply vegetate. I should like to stir them up a bit, and induce

them if possible to *live*. Surely you can sympathize with me in that?"

"I can and I do," said Madame Mirabel, gently. "Of course I was not in earnest just now. Yes, I think your idea is a very good one, and I should like you to succeed in it. Certainly the next best thing to enlightening our own minds is attempting to do the same for others."

Gerard's heart now beat fast. He had not sought this opportunity—had not even imagined that it was to come to him; but here it was. Should he speak, or not?

"I'm glad I have your sympathy," he said at last. "That is one step towards—something else. Do you think you have sufficient sympathy with my scheme to induce you to co-operate?"

"Co-operate?" echoed Madame Mirabel, surprised. "How do you mean? I don't think I could go to London and live among your artisans. I will help you, of course, as far as I can; though I scarcely see in what

way I can do so. I have no experience of such work—my mind has been directed towards other subjects, subjects which you would no doubt consider unprofitable enough. How do you wish me to co-operate with you?"

Gerard made no answer for some moments. He longed to speak the word, but his constitutional reserve quite overcame him, and he dreaded the result. He felt that the crisis of his whole life was upon him—and he hesitated in an agony of indecision. At last a rushing impulse came to the rescue. Had he once more stopped to think he would probably never have spoken. For one brief instant he had the courage of despair.

"You might marry me," he said.

It was done, and the sky seemed whirling round his head. Madame Mirabel stopped short in her walk, dumbfoundered by this sudden declaration. For a moment or two a strange thought passed through her mind. So terrible had been the strain upon her

during the last few months, so keen the anguish, so importunate her need for protection and support, that she felt she might even have been driven to accept Gerard had there been no chance of Lancaster. But of course the consideration had no weight with her now. Her scheme was prospering, and there was no necessity, even, for playing off one against the other. Gerard must be refused, though kindly ; for Madame Mirabel never wantonly inflicted pain—never wounded anyone, unless there were something to be gained by it.

"I never meant to take you by surprise," continued Gerard, feeling somewhat calmer. "And it is not so sudden, after all. You have known what I have felt for you for months—I never said much, but you knew it for all that. This is no sudden impulse on my part. Ever since I first became intimate with you I grew conscious that you were the only woman in the world I could ever care for. I am devoted to you entirely. Without

you my life will be a blank. You understand me as no one else does, and I am never happy but when I am with you. I did not speak before—how could I? Your widowhood was so recent—and I had nothing to offer you—but now—well, I am afraid I have spoken too soon even as it is, for my grandmother was only buried yesterday. You must forgive me all that. I have been enduring a martyrdom of suspense for weeks and weeks. I have spoken sooner than I intended, but I could not bear it any longer. I am in a position to marry now, and—my love for you—is infinite."

This was perhaps the longest speech that Gerard had ever made. It gave Madame Mirabel time to collect her thoughts, and frame a suitable reply.

"Gerard," she said very quietly, "do you know how old I am?"

He tossed his head with an impatient gesture.

"I am over twenty-eight," she continued;

"just seven years older than yourself. When you are still a young man, looking perhaps very much as you look now, I shall be a middle-aged woman with a careworn face that you will not love to gaze at. Don't interrupt me. Women age far more rapidly than men like you ; why, I have aged terribly already since my husband's death, as even you must see. No, Gerard, I am too old for you ; you must marry a younger woman."

"That is a consideration for me, not for you," replied Gerard impulsively. "I care nothing about your age ; I wouldn't have you different from what you are in any respect. Please state your next objection —if you have one."

Madame Mirabel smiled slightly. "Yes, there are several, I am afraid," she said. "What sort of a reception would your mother give me, do you suppose ? She has been very kind to me, but she cannot really like me—there is absolutely nothing in common between us. Besides, she has set her heart

upon your marrying Rosie Chattering. Now nothing would induce me to enter a family in which I should be unwelcome."

"I have told my mother in plain terms that I will not marry Miss Chattering," replied Gerard. "She is no longer under any delusions upon that point. And you would *not* be unwelcome," he said sturdily, though with a secret misgiving in his heart. "My mother likes you very much—she is always in extremes, you know—and my father admired you from the first. Besides, I am not asking you to marry them. It is not as though we were all going to live together. No, that plea has no force in it. My parents must be a secondary consideration to both of us in this matter. If you object to *me*, say so at once, and put me out of this intolerable suspense. Don't trifle with me—my whole destinies are in your hands."

"I cannot accept you, Gerard," she said in a very quiet voice.

There was something in her intonation that struck Gerard somewhat curiously—something that conveyed to him a subtle impression that this non-acceptance was not exactly a refusal. It was as though she had said, "I cannot say Yes, but at the same time I do not say No"—and this somehow blunted the edge of his disappointment. He drew a short, quick breath, and waited for her to continue.

"Don't imagine," she resumed, "that I regard you otherwise than as a very dear and valued friend. Your kindness to my late husband, and your companionship since I was left alone, deserve every possible recognition at my hands. But just now I am in a very unsettled state. My life is scarcely at my own disposal. I am unwell, my nerves are unstrung, my plans entirely undecided. Sometimes I think I was unwise in remaining here at all"——

"All that is beside the mark," interrupted Gerard brusquely. "If you are unsettled

and nervous, that is all the more reason why you should have some one with you to love you and protect you and devote himself to you entirely. No one will ever be more devoted to you than I!" he exclaimed with concentrated passion. "Think—think what you are doing before you refuse me. You *must* marry me, Julia. There! I have never called you Julia before, but I do now. It is rapture to me to utter the mere name. For God's sake, answer me at once. I don't ask you to marry me to-morrow. There's time enough for that—you shall settle the time yourself. I only want to know for certain that you will marry me some time. It is almost a matter of life and death to me. Don't play with me, I beseech you. Will you marry me, or will you not?"

"You impetuous wooer," she said with a laugh so gentle that it did not pain him, "don't you know how very badly you are doing it? It is a great mistake to insist like that, believe me. I have already said

that I cannot accept you. I say nothing about what may happen in less than a hundred years. If you force me to give you a still more definite reply, it will be a point-blank refusal. I shall say 'No, Gerard, neither now nor ever.' Therefore I advise you to leave the matter as it is. At present I have simply not accepted you. We are neither of us bound to the other."

"Ah!" exclaimed Gerard under his breath, "I spoke too soon."

Madame Mirabel made no reply, and Gerard's own perplexity prevented him from saying more. In truth he did not know what to make of it. It seemed that there was still a chance for him, at some indefinite future time. She had simply not accepted him; that is, she had virtually given him no answer at all; and she had hinted that in something less than a hundred years things might happen which could not happen now. But in the same breath she had said that if he insisted on an immediate reply it would

be an unqualified refusal! Surely that was tantamount to a refusal, was it not? Gerard, unversed in women's ways, felt himself entirely at sea. He could make nothing out of it. Then the despondency that was natural to him began to assert its sway; the gloomier view of the situation supervened, and he felt unutterably wretched.

Scarcely another word was uttered until they reached the gate of Gorse Cottage, and Madame Mirabel gave him her hand in farewell. "Let me amend the advice I offered you this afternoon," she said. "Get away from this place as soon as this legacy affair is settled, and travel for two or three months. I am quite disinterested in this, for I tell you frankly that I shall miss you very much. But it would be the best possible thing for you. Go a walking tour in the Ardennes, or the Black Forest, or some perfectly new place. You want a change, and you've no idea how much good it would do you."

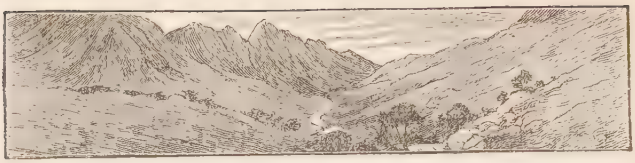
She pressed his hand, smiled, and vanished. Gerard turned away with a bitter look. Clearly she was anxious to be rid of him—to give him an opportunity, no doubt, of falling in love elsewhere. "Just like a woman," soliloquised Gerard in his unreasoning resentment. "They always inflict their worst stabs with a smile or a caress."

It was not a very cheerful dinner that evening. Gerard was unusually taciturn, and the recency of the old lady's death and funeral of course gave a subdued and sober turn to the conversation. Moreover there had been some rather disturbing rumours in the City during the last day or two—rumours affecting the stability of one great commercial house and at least two well-known banks. The *Times* had come out that very morning with an alarmist article upon the position of affairs; prices were shaky on the Exchange, buyers were holding off, and there were many old shrewd City men who said that things would have to be very much worse

before they were any better. It seemed as though the crisis of the previous autumn was to be repeated, and that this time it would not be tided over as it was before. Mr. Palliser's brow was overcast, and he threw out so many terrifying prognostications that his wife grew visibly anxious, and could scarcely eat anything at all. The fact was that nearly the whole of Mr. Palliser's fortune was locked up in some of the very rottenest securities on the market, and although everything went smoothly enough for some time, as long as fair weather lasted, and the good gentleman pocketed big dividends with considerable chuckling and complacency, at the very first indication of a squall the entire flotilla began to show signs of foundering. There were, indeed, serious grounds for anxiety, for the situation was so critical that the merest breath of political troubles might precipitate the disaster, and when the thing once began no one could divine where it would stop. Certainly the investments of

Mr. Palliser would be among the first to suffer. Gerard's own small fortune, luckily, was safe enough, being invested in excellent mortgages. But all the rest of the family property looked in a very parlous state indeed.

This was on Tuesday evening. The two following days we must spend at Gorse Cottage, where important events are now about to happen.



CHAPTER IV.

MRS. JICKLING CATCHES COLD.

MRS. JICKLING returned from her expedition to London on Wednesday afternoon, bringing with her the proceeds of the sale. She had held high state in Augusta-Victoria Villas, and had enjoyed herself immensely. As soon as she arrived she gave out that, having suffered very serious reverses, it would be necessary for her to break up her establishment at No. 3; at present, she told Miss Twistleton (of No. 4), she was staying with her daughter, in her country seat down in Hampshire, but she had decided that a separate establishment would be preferable in the long run, and that

she was probably going to settle upon the Continent. All this sounded very grand in the ears of the goodnatured little old maid, who began to think that Mrs. Jickling must really have been a lady of fortune all along, as well as of high family. Reverses, indeed! With a rich daughter in the country, and a residence in foreign parts in prospect, such reverses must surely be of a most exceptional sort; Miss Twistleton would not have objected to suffering such reverses herself. Mrs. Jickling descanted eloquently upon her ruin, conveying the impression that she had lost a fortune; how rich, then, she must have been, seeing that she was now about to travel and reside abroad! Her dress, too, was so wonderfully improved, and she looked so much 'the lady,' that poor Miss Twistleton fell more than ever into the *rôle* of humble friend, and ministered more assiduously than before to the complacency and self-esteem of her late neighbour. A farewell tea-party was given in honour of

Mrs. Jickling the evening before her departure, and when she finally drove off to Waterloo Station next morning in a hansom cab, the Park felt really proud of her.

She came back with thirty-five pounds in her pocket—a poor sum, she said, but all that the thief of an auctioneer had sold her effects for. Having now done with Royalty Park for good, and knowing that her prolonged residence at Hindhead was out of the question, she was anxious to arrive at some decision about the future; so when she had refreshed herself with a cup of tea, and began to feel a little rested after her journey, she leant back in her chair and entered upon the subject at once.

"Well, Julia," she said, "and now tell me all your news. You said you were going to make enquiries about some place for me abroad. Have you heard of anything as is likely to suit?"

"I think so," replied Madame Mirabel, putting down her cup and producing a

packet of papers from her desk. "Here are all the answers I have had; we'll go over them one by one." Then she arranged the letters on the table in front of her, and glanced carefully over them, while Mrs. Jickling looked anxiously on. "Let me see —ah, here it is. Just listen to this. A German family in the town of Weimar will receive you as a lodger for a year. The eldest daughter speaks a little English. The husband holds some post under the *Protocolsführer*, and their means are very limited. That is the only reason why they are willing to take you in. Of course they live very simply, and as the family seems pretty numerous you would have excellent opportunities of learning German."

"H'm! I don't think I should care for that, very much," said Mrs. Jickling, with a dissatisfied expression.

"Of course the life would be very quiet," replied Madame Mirabel; "still, Weimar is a good town in its way, and the living is

wonderfully cheap. Those people will take you in for eighteen marks a week. However, there are several more to choose from. Here's one at Lausanne, on the Lake of Geneva—a regular *pension*, you know, with plenty of visitors, chiefly English and Americans; you can have any amount of gaiety there, and all for five francs a day. It's a great big house, though—not very homelike, I expect."

"That sounds better," remarked Mrs. Jickling reflectively; "but we won't decide in a hurry. Put a mark against that. Haven't you got anything in England as 'ud do?"

"Yes, there are two or three in England," said Madame Mirabel, taking up another batch of covers. "Listen to this, now. No, that's not it. Ah, here. This is from a widow lady. Inhabits a small but comfortable house in the Dalston Road, fifteen minutes' walk from an important cabstand, and commanding a cheerful view of the

passing omnibuses. Desires to share the spiritual advantages offering in the vicinity with a serious lady of mature years, who would not object to making her own bed. Terms, thirty shillings a week. No wine. Calvinist, redeemed."

"What in the name of fortune does the woman mean by that?" demanded Mrs. Jickling, in angry scorn.

"Well, she must either mean that *she*'s a Calvinist redeemed, and states the fact for the enlightenment of any one who may answer her advertisement, or else that she insists on the applicant being one," replied Madame Mirabel seriously. "I don't know whether you could be considered in that light, I'm sure—that you know best yourself."

"Go on to the next," cried Mrs. Jickling. "Make my own bed, indeed! No wine, either! I think I *see* myself! No, thank you; none o' your hypocritical skinflints for me,—not on this occasion. 'Pon my word,

I'd like to set eyes on that widow, just out o' curiosity."

"She may be a most estimable person," remarked Madame Mirabel, taking up another envelope. "But there's no need to force your inclinations, if you don't care for it. Now we come to something different. This is from Upper Norwood—a charming neighbourhood. A young married couple, whose honeymoon is just over, are desirous of meeting with an elderly lady of experience, who has some knowledge of cookery. They hint that, being utterly without experience of housekeeping themselves, they want some one to undertake that duty for them. Also that, owing to a certain incompatibility of temper, they think that the presence of a third person would be desirable, in order to relieve them from the embarrassment of an unbroken *tête-à-tête*. Drawing-room furnished *à la Louis Quinze*. Gold and silver elephants on the mantelpiece. The gentleman's salary is narrow, and he has

liabilities. An addition to their income is therefore necessary. Applicants who could influence orders in the coal-trade would be preferred."

"A couple o' young fools!" snorted Mrs. Jickling. "Tired of each other already, and no money to pay the butcher's bill. A pretty prospect, indeed,—a woman like me goin' to the rescue. Want me to cook for them, I s'pose, too. You needn't answer that, Julia. Isn't there a good boarding-house on your list?"

"Yes, there's one in Finsbury," said Madame Mirabel, "but it doesn't sound very inviting. I fancy it's one of those stuffy places that always smell of boiled cabbage. There's one more in England —another family. Shall I read it?"

"Well, you can read it," said Mrs. Jickling in a discouraging minor. "It's not likely to be any good, I expect."

"The advertiser," replied Madame Mirabel, looking at a paper, "is a widowed clergyman

of narrow means, who wishes to hear of some benevolent elderly lady willing to reside at the Vicarage and be a sort of grandmother to his nine children. The children appear to have been rather spoilt, as the clergyman speaks of them as unaccustomed to restraint; but he believes in the rule of love rather than in that of fear, and it must be understood that under no circumstances are they to be thwarted or rebuked. The influence of an elderly Christian lady, to coax them into obedience, will, he thinks, be the most efficacious remedy; but she must make herself beloved from the very first, otherwise the arrangement cannot stand. In return she will enjoy not only the advantages of a happy Christian home, a romantic village, and a useful life, but occasional intercourse with the best county families in the neighbourhood; the terms for which will be £75 a year, paid quarterly in advance."

"I do believe you're making it all up, Julia," ejaculated Mrs. Jickling. "Of all

impudent swindlers I ever come across, commend me to that clergyman. Grandmother, indeed! I'd grandmother him and his spoilt brats too, if I once got inside his 'ouse. Why Julia, you've been regular put upon, I declare if you 'aven't. But come, that ain't all. You've 'ad some more answers from the Continent, I know."

"Well, as to the Continent, there really need be no difficulty," answered Madame Mirabel. "There are scores of *pensions* that would suit—*pensions* where you could live comfortably for four marks or five francs a day, according to whether you preferred Germany or Switzerland. The only thing is, we must be careful to fix on a place that is kept going all the year round. Some of them, you know, only open for the season. Now here is one that I really think will do. It is in Heidelberg, and is called the 'Pension Scheibler.' The people are half English, and talk English as well as they do German, and they say

they'll take you in for £60 a year—on the understanding, of course, that you stay with them at least a twelvemonth. Heidelberg is one of the prettiest towns in Germany. You can get anything you want there; and then you have the Stadtgarten, and the Castle grounds, and the promenades where the band plays every evening and sometimes oftener, and good English society, and a stream of visitors constantly coming and going. I don't believe, myself, that you'll do better than that. It'll be cheap and cheerful. What do you think yourself?"

"It don't sound bad," said Mrs. Jickling. "Seems to me we've got to choose between that and the one at Lausanne. We'll think it over and see what's best to be done. I suppose I can take a day or two to consider, for I don't want to buy a pig in a poke—in foreign parts, especially."

"There's no need for any undue haste," replied Madame Mirabel. "I think myself that Heidelberg would suit you best. The

house there is not too large; it only accommodates about twenty visitors, and would be altogether more homelike than that huge place at Lausanne. The town is ever so much prettier, too. What a change it will be for you after Stockwell!"

While Madame Mirabel was speaking, Mrs. Jickling's countenance had been undergoing a series of changes suggestive of some impending cataclysm, and, as she ceased, the convulsive working of the good lady's muscles culminated in a stentorian and resounding sneeze, which shook her frame from head to foot, and set the very windows ringing.

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Madame Mirabel, jumping. "You seem to have caught cold."

Instead of replying, Mrs. Jickling underwent another process of muscular agitation, and, screwing up her eyes, again emitted a sneeze which combined the reverberating sound of an explosion with a sort of despair-

ing bellow. Three or four times was the unfortunate woman subjected to similar throes, and then, exhausted by her efforts, she lay back in her chair, panting and overspent.

"I knew it!" she gasped at length. "I've caught a most fearful cold. There was an imp of a boy in the train this morning as would keep the window open behind me, drat 'im, and I got my feet badly wet yesterday afternoon and 'adn't time to change 'em till I got back again. I was sure I sh'd suffer sooner or later, and now I believe I'm in for it. If there is anything as makes me wild it is a cold in the 'ead. I'm beginnin' to feel quite shivery already."

Madame Mirabel stirred the fire into a fine cheerful blaze, and opened a well-stocked cupboard.

"Well, you must keep out of draughts," she said, "and see that you don't get worse. You do seem to have rather a bad cold, and we must try and nip it in the bud. A

little hot brandy and water will be a good thing for you—unless you object to spirits."

Mrs. Jickling did not object to spirits, and in a few minutes was solacing herself with a steaming tumbler which appeared to comfort her considerably. She sipped and coughed alternately for some time, while Madame Mirabel gathered her papers together, and locked up her desk; then the room began to grow dark, and the faint patter of raindrops was heard upon the window-panes. For a quarter of an hour neither spoke. At last Madame Mirabel, wishing to read, got up and touched the bell.

"What's that for?" asked Mrs. Jickling, putting down her glass.

"I'm ringing for lights," she replied.

"We needn't have 'em just yet, need we?" said Mrs. Jickling fretfully. "The light o' the fire's about as much as I can bear—it hurts my eyes, somehow."

"Oh, very well," assented her daughter.

"I thought the lamp would be more cheerful."

Mrs. Jickling made no reply, and when the servant came up Madame Mirabel only told her to draw the curtains. Another period of silence supervened, broken at last by a sort of little grunt from the elder lady, who was lying back in her chair with closed eyes.

"Aren't you feeling well, mother?" asked Madame Mirabel, glancing at her.

"My head throbs," muttered Mrs. Jickling. "I dare say it's that brandy. It's got into my head, I expect, and my back feels as though I had cold water running down it."

"You'd better go to bed," suggested Madame Mirabel. "You seem a little knocked up, and want a good night's rest. You'll be all right to-morrow, if you take care of yourself now."

"I don't feel like moving," said her mother, in the same muffled tone.

Madame Mirabel thought it was perhaps

unwise of her to have made her mother drink so strong a cordial, and that this was the result of it; but a scrutinizing look at the old woman's face caused her to reconsider the opinion. Mrs. Jickling's hand was hot, too, and her breathing laboured. She was evidently in the first stage of a bad feverish cold, which ought not to be neglected; it would never do for her to fall seriously ill, for more reasons than we need set down here. Just then she opened her eyes, shading them with her hand from the glowing firelight.

"Yes, I'm in for a nasty cold," she said, rousing herself with an effort. "I feel a bit feverish, too—that's a sure sign. I dare say you wouldn't mind telling 'em to make a bit o' fire in my room for me, Julia, and letting 'em bring me up a morsel o' dinner in bed. There's nothing like takin' these things in time, you know, and I don't mean to be laid up without knowin' the reason why."

Madame Mirabel told her mother she

thought her very sensible, and, ringing the bell once more, gave the necessary order. In half-an-hour the room upstairs was comfortably warm, and Mrs. Jickling accordingly retired between the blankets, with every intention of staying there until she felt quite well again; Madame Mirabel, who was anxious above all things to avoid calling in medical advice if possible, sedulously applauding her resolution. No doubt her mother would be better in the morning; but even if the worst came to the worst, and the doctor had to be summoned, it would not matter much, as they were entire strangers to each other.

* * * * *

Lancaster was sitting at his desk, next day, turning over the leaves of a large book. We have not, hitherto, seen our friend in his own house; indeed, being an active man with an extending practice, he was not often at home. On the present occasion, however, it so happened that there was nothing to

take him out, and he was rather glad of the rest. The room in which he sat was in several ways characteristic of its occupant. The precise simplicity and good taste which distinguished his habitual costume were observable in the appointments of his house, and the study, where he passed most of his time, was well though plainly furnished. There are some men who, being bachelors, are content with rough and disorderly surroundings. Lancaster was not one of these. He was particular, fastidious even, as to table-service, and had a keen eye for any irregularity or neglect; his furniture was severely simple, but solid, comfortable, and the best of its kind; and on dust he had no mercy. His house was, in fact, a model of neatness and order, and the books which lined his walls from floor to ceiling were so arranged as to enable him to place his hand without a moment's hesitation upon almost any volume he might happen to require. The one now before him, however, did not

form part of his own library. It was, indeed, the book he had borrowed two or three days previously from Madame Mirabel, and he was now dipping into it here and there with a frown of half-amused perplexity upon his brow.

"What possible fascination can such a subject have for her?" he muttered to himself. "A clear-headed, healthy-minded young woman like that—the last person in the world, one would have thought, to take an interest in hypnotism. How carefully she seems to have read it, too! So many passages marked" — turning over a few leaves and skimming the pages as he did so. "Yet she must have been paying attention to it for some time—I remember she jested with me once about hypnotizing that poor husband of hers, when he was getting well so rapidly. Well, there may be more in hypnotism than some people think, though if *I*'m a hypnotist there never was one more utterly unconscious of his own power."

He stopped turning the leaves over, and held the book open at a page scored with a thick pencil-line from top to bottom.

"HYPNOTISM—ITS THERAPEUTIC VALUE. *Efficacy in the Removal of Mental Illusions and Dominant Ideas. Cure or Modification of Morbid Symptoms. Maintenance and Resuscitation of the Vital Powers.*"

Lancaster knit his brows and read attentively for some time. There were passages in the chapter which seemed to describe his own experiences in the case of Gaston Mirabel, and these interested him profoundly. The examples by which the writer's theory was supported were still more striking,—cases of steady, uninterrupted, if slow, improvement while the influence lasted, and rapid loss of ground if the influence was prematurely withdrawn. Something like a smothered curse rose in his throat as his thoughts reverted to the foul play which, as he was now sure, had cost poor Mirabel his life. He read on and on, oblivious of the passing time. Then he

came to the last division of the chapter, the opening paragraph of which ran as follows—

"*Just as, in the hands of a skilful, experienced, and benevolent operator, the hypnotic power may be potent for the cure of disease by the restoration of the vital energy, so, in malevolent or unskilful hands, its exercise may be attended with disastrous consequences; where skill merely is wanting, complications may arise from misdirection or inequality of appliance, while in cases of actual malevolence, the power may be used for the illicit subjugation of the patient's will, and even for the extinction, instead of the resuscitation, of his vitality. In short, hypnotism may be employed as the instrument of safe and secret murder; its practice, therefore, should be safeguarded by the closest restrictions and severest penalties which governments have power to impose.*"

He read the chapter to the end; then turned the pages back, and read the whole through once more. His mind was full of thought, yet it was thought that he found it impossible to clothe in words.

"Can I be on the brink of a discovery?" he asked himself at last. "Am I to find the key to the mystery in the horrible suggestions of this book? It is possible—

though I never believed it myself—that the man's right, and that Mirabel's marvellous recovery was due to some occult influence or power exercised unconsciously by myself. His wife more than half believed it—or pretended to. Certain it is, that the moment my back was turned his vitality began to sink. So far, appearances are in favour of the theory. But there's more. What did Mirabel mean by crying out that I had come to save him—that he had died a thousand deaths, but now was going to live? It may be there was more in that than I suspected. Could there have been any sinister influence at work while I was away? The mere thought is horrible. Besides, who is open to suspicion? Who would want to harm him? Not the servants —not Gerard—not Charlton—not his wife. No, the facts don't fit in. And yet his death was mysterious. It was literally surrounded by mystery. Who sent that telegram? If I could only find that out,

I believe I should discover the whole secret."

He rose from his chair, filled a pipe, and began to pace the room, smoking.

"When one is fumbling in the dark," he soliloquized, "without a glimmer or a clue, no hypothesis ought to be thrown aside simply because it sounds absurd or seems impossible. The facts in this case are so strange that their explanation is probably strange too. Suppose I say—the person who sent me that telegram did so in order to separate me from Mirabel. In that case, the person's ulterior object would be to injure either Mirabel or me. Injury to me could only mean injury to me in my profession. Injury to Mirabel could only mean — his death. Who wanted him to die? No, it won't do. And yet, supposing that some one did want him to die, and sent—or caused to be sent—that telegram, who killed him, if killed he was? There can be but one answer. It must have

been the same false, murderous hand; the author of the message and the murderer of Mirabel must have been one and the same person!"

He gazed abstractedly out of the window for a few moments, and then resumed his walk.

"I'll talk it over with madame herself," he said, his teeth closing firmly over the mouthpiece of his pipe. "Of course she's as much in the dark about the telegram as I am, but she's wonderfully shrewd, and—" he stopped abruptly. "There's a curious fascination about her," he continued thoughtfully. "She's a sweet woman. Heigho! I wonder whether—I believe she likes me, and I'm not sure it's wise to go there often; it's rather an effort to keep away even now. I wonder what will be the end of it. I almost fancy I shall let myself drift. I've lived alone long enough; and if things were to come to a point, I think I could make her happy."

At that very instant the door opened, and a note from Madame Mirabel was put into his hands.

"Mrs. Jickling ill!" he muttered, raising his eyebrows. "I see — a severe cold, attended by strong fever. Very well," he said to the servant, "say I'll be round at two o'clock. 'The mysterious mother'—I am to see her at last, am I? I'd better have lunch at once."

He ate with the hearty appetite of a healthy man, but his thoughts continued as before. He could not get the mystery out of his head. The old puzzles worried him as much as ever. Who sent the telegram? Who knew anything about Bretschneider and his proposed conference? What friend or acquaintance of his or Mirabel's lived in Lucerne? And there was no reply. He went over the same old weary round again and again, and never got any further. And then his mind reverted to the terrible suggestions contained in the book he had

borrowed from Madame Mirabel. But still he could see no light.

Madame Mirabel was writing in the dining-room when he was announced. She at once put down her pen, and, rising from her chair, welcomed him with a smile.

"I am really sorry to have been obliged to trouble you," she said, brightly. "The fact is that my mother caught a violent cold in London, and since her return she has had a good deal of fever. I thought it best to let you see her, and so did she; but she's not seriously ill, I'm glad to say. I fancy she only wants good nursing."

"You did perfectly right to send for me," said Lancaster, sitting in front of the fire. "Feverish colds can scarcely be attended to too promptly. And I'm always glad to come here, as you know."

A ray of happiness flashed across her face. "It is pleasant to hear you say that," she said softly. "Have you been working hard lately? You look pale, somehow."

"No, not more than usual," he said, "Indeed this is the first time that I've been out to-day."

"Yes?" she answered interrogatively.

"I was reading all the morning," he continued; "reading that book you were good enough to lend me the other day, and I got so much interested in it that I could scarcely put it down. You seem to have been a diligent student of it, too."

"What book? I don't remember," asked Madame Mirabel.

"Don't you remember my borrowing one from your shelf?" said Lancaster, smiling.

"Ah, I recollect now," she replied; "but I didn't see which you took. What was it?"

"It was Streich on Hypnotism," said Lancaster, glancing at her.

Madame Mirabel changed colour. "Oh!" she said with assumed indifference. "You might have found something better worth reading than that, I think. By the bye, you

promised to bring me a book from your library — I fancy you've forgotten that, haven't you?"

"Upon my word, I *had* forgotten it," answered Lancaster; "I am very sorry indeed. I should have brought it with me, no doubt, only that work on hypnotism put everything else out of my head. It awoke a train of very curious and rather painful speculation, and has roused in me a desire to give more attention to the subject than I have paid to it hitherto."

"No doubt, it must have considerable attractions for a medical man," remarked Madame Mirabel, outwardly calm. "It even interests me to a certain extent."

"Does it?" asked Lancaster. "Well, we must compare notes about it some day. Do you know, I came across a passage this morning which made a very deep impression on my mind. You remember how strongly poor Mirabel used to feel that his wonderful recovery, while it lasted, was due to some

magnetic influence unconsciously exercised upon him by myself. You yourself once accused me, jestingly, of the same thing. I never believed in it; but I am free to confess that what Streich lays down upon this point has somewhat shaken my convictions. At least, his theory offers a curiously plausible explanation of the facts in this particular case—the continued improvement as long as I was in attendance, the sudden and rapid collapse as soon as my back was turned—There, I don't want to distress you. I know how painful all such thoughts must be to you. But put yourself in my place. A doctor who has lost a patient under mysterious circumstances *must* try and solve the enigma, if only in the interests of his profession. And when there is another mystery connected with it—you know what I mean—the responsibility he labours under is increased a hundredfold."

"You have my fullest, my most earnest sympathy," said Madame Mirabel, with a

tremendous effort. "How can I help you? You know you can command my assistance, in this and in all else."

"I know I can," replied Lancaster, with his rare smile, laying his hand on hers. For one moment it rested there, and he was in danger. Then a bell rang from upstairs.

"Perhaps I had better see your mother at once," he said rising.

Madame Mirabel rose too, and led the way into the sick-room. It may well be supposed that she had sent for Lancaster reluctantly. She did not wish him to see her mother, for more reasons than one. But Mrs. Jickling had had so very bad a night, and seemed so exceedingly unwell in the morning, that it was impossible to resist her urgent wish for medical assistance; indeed Madame Mirabel herself was a little alarmed, and thought it just as well that the doctor should be called in. She entered the room softly, and signed to Lancaster to follow.

Mrs. Jickling was sitting up in bed with

her night-cap on, supported by several pillows. Her eyes were closed, and for the first moment or two she did not open them; which gave Lancaster time to look at her with his keen, professional glance before she was aware of his presence. His attention was immediately arrested. There was something strangely familiar to him in the worn, wrinkled face. Surely he must have seen her before; but where—that he could not remember. Then she opened her eyes and looked in her turn at him. A flash of recognition passed over her features at once, and she held out her hands to him in astonishment.

"My preserver!" cried the old woman, in her harsh voice. "Well, of all things, that I should find you here!"

Madame Mirabel was struck dumb. "What do you mean?" she managed to say at last, looking from one to the other.

"Why, I know this gentleman very well," replied Mrs. Jickling, with an air of consider-

able dignity. "He rescued me when I was in a bit o' difficulty in Lucerne—bein' swindled by a couple o' them thieves o' porters, goin' to the station with my luggage. Why, Sir, if it 'adn't a been for you I doubt whether I sh'd a got away at all. And so you're Dr. Lancaster, as I've 'eard so much about! The way as things do come round is really beyond everything."

"I remember the circumstance perfectly," said Lancaster, smiling, "but of course I had no idea at the time who it was that I was privileged to assist. I thought your face was familiar to me the instant I saw it."

The next moment he was struck by the coincidence. Madame Mirabel's mother in Lucerne at the very time! Strange—why, she had never even told him, then, that she had a mother; never mentioned it when he was going to the very place where her mother was. Involuntarily he glanced at her. She was as white as rage, and terror, and deadly anxiety could make her. Gra-

dually but relentlessly, she felt, discovery was approaching. Everything seemed to be combining against her. Fate, in its varied shapes, was bent upon her destruction. What malignant imp had arranged that fatal meeting between her mother and Dr. Lancaster? What unseen fury had brought her mother to that house, and thrown the two together a second time? What fatuity was it that had prompted her to leave that book about—the book of her unhallowed study—and had thrown it in the way of Lancaster? From all sides she seemed to see detection coming. She was being made herself the instrument of her own doom.

Still, she did not give up. The prize at stake was too great to be abandoned in view of the present *contretemps*, alarming as it was. As yet, at any rate, Lancaster had no suspicions, and she would take care that none should be suggested to his mind.

"It is really a very curious coincidence,"

she said, with a careless smile. "You are not strangers, then, it seems. It will be all the pleasanter for you, mother, to have a doctor whom you know—though we'll hope you'll not want one long. There's nothing much the matter with her, Dr. Lancaster, is there?"

These words aroused Lancaster from the reverie into which he had fallen. He came forward, felt Mrs. Jickling's pulse, took her temperature, and asked a question or two; then he said that there was nothing to be alarmed at, only that great care must be exercised in order to prevent complications. The fact was that he feared pneumonia, though there was no necessity for saying so. He wrote a prescription, gave a few directions as to diet, and then prepared to leave, saying that he would look in next day.

He looked very thoughtful as he went downstairs, followed by Madame Mirabel. She, feverishly anxious to find out exactly the condition of his mind, drew him once

more into the dining-room ; but there was a reserve, an abstraction, in his manner which had not been noticeable before, and this increased her uneasiness. He excused himself from prolonging his stay, on the score of patients to be visited ; and when he had gone she again went up to her mother's room. But even here she found no comfort, for Mrs. Jickling had lapsed into taciturnity, and made very cold response to the unwonted advances of her daughter ; whereupon Madame Mirabel, left to the torments of anxiety, and unable to bear her solitude any longer, arrayed herself in the richest walking-costume she possessed, and set out upon a round of calls.

CHAPTER V.

"HAVE ALL HIS VENTURES FAILED?"

THE crash had come at last. For some days the uneasiness in financial circles had been growing; the Bank rate went up, shares of all descriptions went down, capitalists began to draw in their horns, and everybody seemed to be waiting breathlessly for the impending thunderstorm. At last it broke. At three o'clock one afternoon the Colossal Joint Stock Bank suspended payment, and before five it was a foregone conclusion that the great house of Varley, Templeton & Co., India and Russia merchants, bill-discounters and private bankers would suspend too. One other eminent

firm was talked about, and reported to be in difficulties; anxiety as to its chances of weathering the storm ran high, and for some hours its fate was undecided. Meanwhile the two big failures that had taken place—for next morning the stoppage of Varley's was announced—was bringing down smaller houses one after another. The City was, for the time being, demoralized. The wildest rumours passed from mouth to mouth—some favourable, some sinister. There were scarcely a hundred firms of standing who could feel sure of their own safety. No one knew what to expect; no one knew who might be the next to go, or what disastrous result the next failure might have upon himself. The ruin was already widespread enough, and few City men slept comfortably that night; but the trouble was not yet over. During the forenoon of the succeeding day the Capital & Discount Banking Corporation closed its doors, and the agony reached its climax.

Poor Mr. Palliser no sooner got wind of what was going on than he rushed up to town third-class, vowing that he was a ruined man and looking unutterable things. Nor did his visit bring him any comfort. The whole City, as he told his wife afterwards, was as hopelessly deranged as though there had been an earthquake. The air seemed full of the wildest and most alarming rumours, but not a tittle of solid practical information could he get. He went round, with a palpitating heart, to the various offices in the fortunes of which he was interested, and found some of them still open, to his momentary relief; but the few seconds of conversation he contrived to secure with the managers and secretaries were not calculated to reassure him. In two instances, indeed, he found the doors locked, with every appearance of having been locked for weeks. Last of all he repaired to the imposing, handsome, prosperous-looking mansion where his cherished Non-Intoxicating

Liquor Association rented chambers. There he found no one but an athletic office-boy playing leap-frog with the stools, who told him that Mr. Jerningham had gone out of town on Monday, without leaving word how soon he would be back.

Meanwhile Mrs. Palliser, pale and agitated, had been pacing the drawing-room —that pretty drawing-room, of which she was so fond—in an agony of apprehension. Often and often during that dreadful day did the poor lady pray for fortitude, for resignation, for a spirit of composure and tranquility; sometimes she prayed that things might not turn out so badly after all, and hoped against hope that ruin might be averted. Mrs. Palliser was of a rather more timid disposition than her husband, and whenever she saw that he was on the lookout for some new investments was wont to pray very earnestly that he might be 'guided' in his choice—a petition which always seemed to have been satisfactorily

answered as long as the eight, or the nine, or the ten per cent. dividends were paid; but what was she to think now? Of course, it was a 'dispensation'; everything of an unpleasant or alarming nature that happened to her was a dispensation, and dispensations were always mysterious. Even now she cherished a faint, lingering hope that God would interfere to prevent anything happening to the Non-Intoxicating Liquor Association, and just one or two other enterprises in which she knew her husband to be largely interested; but the main impression on her mind was that He would not 'see fit' to do so. Oh, that they had been satisfied with a safe and modest four per cent.! They would have been quite as rich in the long run, for although the dividends would not have been so large, neither would the losses, nor so frequent; Mr. Palliser having already been made to smart somewhat severely on various occasions for his credulity and want of judgment. He was not a greedy man, and Mrs.

Palliser did both her husband and herself injustice when, in her abasement and remorse, she groaned over the fate of 'those that make haste to be rich;' he was simply an over-confident and flighty gentleman, with a weakness for the startling and sensational, and impatient of the laborious and humdrum, who talked big and lived in an atmosphere of Spanish castles. His imagination, indeed, was of a perfervid nature altogether. According to his own account, everything that ever happened to him was wonderful and extraordinary in some way. The simplest occurrences assumed, in his eyes, monstrous and strange proportions, which were of course reproduced in their full magnitude when he told the story; and an anecdote related to him by some one else, and repeated by him to a third party, was sometimes scarcely recognizable. It was to this exuberance of speech that Mrs. Fullerton referred when she confided to Mrs. Chattering her disapproval of

Mr. Palliser's 'boastful' way, and which prompted the more cynical enquiry of an old gentleman who had known him in earlier years—"Well, and does Palliser tell as many *lies* as ever?"

Gerard was not at home just now. Of course he had not breathed a word to his parents about his offer to Madame Mirabel, and certainly neither of them had the faintest idea that anything of the sort had taken place. But very soon after his interview with her a great longing came over him for change of scene. He had no intention of setting out on a walking-tour abroad, as she had suggested,—many considerations forbade such a step as that, at any rate for the present; a shorter trip, however, might not be a bad thing for him, and he consequently started off, two days after the idea entered his head, and was now putting up at the Plough Inn, near Alfoxden, on the Quantock Hills. The choice of venue proved a good one. The breezy slopes, commanding views

of the Bristol Channel with the Welsh coast in the blue distance: the deep, still, beautiful green combes: the rocky shore, with its wealth of ammonites and curious row of 'cathedral stalls,' at Kilve: the fine old Court at Quantoxhead, claimed by the natives as the veritable Bluebeard's Castle: the rich, rolling meadows, the springing corn-fields, the clover-fields, the dim, quiet woods where the great St. John's-wort grows and the mysterious goatsucker sails and flaps about nocturnally, though not yet in their summer glory, all delighted Gerard, and exercised a wonderfully soothing influence upon his mind. He even enjoyed the rough, hard cider of the district, and made havoc in the flummery and rich cream that Mrs. Stroud, his black-eyed, portly hostess, set before him; little recking, alas! of the clouds, and the storms, and the shipwrecks in which he would soon have to bear a part—mildly wondering, indeed, to himself that the cheerful beauty of his surroundings and the

country fare and Arcadian simplicity of his life should have eased his smart so strangely, even if the ease were but for a short time. Meanwhile his parents were in grievous straits; but it was good for him to be away, for he could not have helped them, and he was not destined to have many more hours of the calm, sunny cheerfulness of the Quantock Hills. To him they were always the Delectable Mountains of his life; the Hill Difficulty, and the Valley of Humiliation, were to come afterwards.

And he was favoured by the weather, too. One hears a good deal about weather in England, but there is one property of English weather which seems absolutely constant and fixed, as the most unobservant must have noticed—it is always and invariably *exceptional.* Does it rain for a week without stopping? Ah, but that is exceptional, quite; it *never* rains like that in ordinary seasons. Is it cold? Well, it *is* cold, but that again is exceptional; properly it ought to be hot.

Do you remark upon the warmth, and the fineness, and the sunshine? Exceptional again; it is years since we had such weather! Snow, hail, blizzards are perfect *lusus naturæ*, being still more exceptional than a glass at 85°, or fogs at midsummer; while even the winds of March and the showers of April are always 'unusually' something, in spite of the regularity of their recurrence. Fortunately for Gerard, the exceptionality of the weather during his stay in Quantockia took a pleasant form, and helped him to be happy in spite of everything. His views of life grew calmer and brighter under the calm, bright sky. The chances of his love-suit seemed to gain in clearness and solidity as he wandered under the grand old beech-trees behind Alfoxden Cottage, or rambled up one of those glorious sylvan glades which lead one into the very heart of the Quantocks—a fairyland of moss-like turf, and flowers, and tinkling rivulets, under the greenwood tree. All the sympathies of his nature seemed to glow and

widen under the rich, warm loveliness of the nature which lay around him, and for the time being he felt soothed and gladdened and at peace. Gerard never forgot the week he spent among the Quantocks. He often looked back upon it in the sterner life which was even then awaiting him,—when he was tempted to feel that sorrow's crown of sorrow was remembering happier things —when he was learning that hardest of all lessons, that only through sorrow and discipline and self-sacrifice can lasting joys be reached.

It was a letter from his mother that roused him from his dream of happiness. We can imagine what the poor lady wrote. Gerard, accustomed as he was to his parents' habit of exaggeration, felt a cold pain at his heart as he read the gushing, despairing sentences. Evidently there was no time to be lost. He packed his portmanteau without delay, snatched a hasty meal, and drove straight off to Bridgewater. His great anxiety, now,

was to be at home again, and find out for himself how matters actually stood.

Poor Mr. Palliser! He had come back from the City in great bewilderment and distress, unable to give any comfort to his wife. The whole world seemed to be toppling about his ears. Nothing, so far, had actually happened to him beyond what has been hinted at above; but during the two or three following days the extent of the catastrophe gradually came out. One after another his investments disappeared. Companies which had been rotten for months or years collapsed like a pricked balloon. A Guarantee & Loan Society in which he held seven thousand pounds' worth of shares was one of the first to go. The Olivian Real Estate & Mining Association, with a capital (on paper) of £5,000,000 in 50,000 shares of £100 each (£25 paid up) announced a heavy call upon the scrip-holders; and Mr. Palliser, alas! held no fewer than one hundred and thirty-five shares in that ill-omened enterprise.

Compared with this, the disappearance of Mr. Jerningham and the premature demise of the Universal Warranted Non-Intoxicating Alcoholic Liquor Association were mere trifles; although the name of Marmaduke Palliser figured prominently upon the original List of Shareholders, and he found himself liable for something like three times the amount of money that he had risked in the undertaking.

"I see nothing for it but the workhouse," proclaimed the unlucky gentleman, compressing his lips and glaring portentously round the room. "I'm a ruined man. It's hard upon us, at our time o' life—uncommon hard. Well, we've had our day, and now I suppose we must make room for some one else."

"But Marmaduke, will there be nothing left?" asked his wife, weeping. "Surely we can save something out of the wreck. It's impossible that we can be *penniless!* I can't imagine it. I don't know what it's like to

have literally no money and no home. It seems an impossible condition of things. Oh, if we could only wake up and find it all a dream!"

"Ah," said Mr. Palliser grimly. "I dare say."

"But *shall* we be penniless, Marmaduke?" repeated his wife anxiously. "That is the terrible question. A mere pittance of an income, if it were only certain, would make all the difference. But ruin—destitution—beggary"—and here the poor lady broke down afresh, and failed to finish her sentence.

"Well, I can't say," replied Mr. Palliser with an effort. "It's not easy to know exactly how we shall stand until everything's settled up. One thing we may be sure of—that those who can pay will have to pay, and that to the uttermost farthing. It's the men of straw who'll escape best," said the poor man, with a touch of his former importance. "Those who've nothing to lose can't lose much, that's clear; whereas we"——

"Ah! How are we to live?" cried Mrs. Palliser in despair. "Oh, Marmaduke, what a blessing it is that your dear mother has been spared all this!"

"Yes," muttered her husband. "Poor old dear—she's well provided for, at any rate. And Gerard's safe enough, too. That's some consolation. By the way—it's about time you wrote to him, isn't it?"

"Oh, let the dear boy have his holiday," said Mrs. Palliser, wiping her eyes. "To-morrow evening will be soon enough. Oh, Marmaduke, I can live anywhere—in a common cottage, even—if only we have *something* to depend upon. If only we could find some tiny place in the country, somewhere in Wales, for instance, where we could get something for fifteen pounds a year, and live on the simplest food, I should be content. It's that that is so dreadful to me—the fear that we may have nothing. I don't mind the loss of fortune, so much, or position—it's the dread of being absolutely penniless. I

shall be in an agony until I know exactly how we stand."

Of course both these good people knew that they could never be reduced to starvation with an unmarried son possessing three hundred a year in his own right, besides a substantial sum of ready money. And yet both shrank from the idea of becoming either the guests or the pensioners of Gerard; it was repulsive and distasteful in the extreme. They almost felt as though they would have preferred that Gerard should have had nothing—except for his own sake; and so strong was their reluctance that Mr. Palliser had already begun to devise schemes of independence for himself, vowing that he would accept any situation, however humble, that would enable him to earn a salary.

"I'll take a clerkship in a country bank," he said, "if it turns out that we have nothing. I don't mind what I do. I'll turn commercial traveller if there's nothing else—I believe I could cry wine and sell vinegar with the

best of 'em. I don't know, either—I shouldn't wonder if there's a chance in the City, even, when all this hurly-burly's over. Whenever a big house fails there are always a lot of smaller ones cropping up—rising out of its ashes, so to speak—and things may be all the better now that the air's cleared—established on a sounder basis, as it were. Come, wife, don't let's look on the darkest side of the business till we need. Hope for the best, prepare for the worst, as poor old mother used to say. There's one consolation—it isn't *only* the rotten concerns that have gone. I may have been misled in some of my investments,—that Olivian affair, for instance—but when we see grand old institutions like the Colossal Joint Stock Bank and Varley, Templeton & Co. succumbing to the times, one can't but feel we're in good company."

To this undeniable fact Mrs. Palliser gave a somewhat dolorous assent; not liking to dash her husband's consolation by pointing

out that ruin was ruin, whether incurred in good company or not. She had her own views, too, about Mr. Palliser's fitness for a clerkship in a country bank, which she also abstained from expressing; she even went so far as to doubt, in her despondent mood, whether he would be able to obtain a situation at all, considering his age and inexperience of routine work. As for herself, she knew perfectly well that she could do nothing at all. In spite of the sprightliness and jauntiness which often characterized her manner, there was a constitutional indolence about Mrs. Palliser; she never really did anything, was never seen with a bit of needlework in her hands, or taking part in any enterprise of the charitable or useful sort, but was given rather to sitting with her hands before her, sometimes reading a pretty religious book, and sometimes in the garden, admiring her lawns and flowers. Any sudden calamity, therefore, which would deprive her of this pleasant, drifting life was naturally

very dreadful to her, and for a long time not even her wonted buoyancy of spirits asserted itself in her favour.

Gerard's return was a source of great though unspoken relief to both. He found them anxious and wretched enough, but calmer and somewhat more resigned than they had been a few days previously. Mr. Palliser made a clean breast of everything, rather exaggerating than minimising the extent of his disasters; and Gerard listened with much external calmness, though no one could have guessed the blank despair which now reigned within him. Not a word of lamentation or of disappointment escaped his lips, and his parents, who never laid any embargo upon the free expression of their own feelings, were astonished at his apparent callousness. He heard them to the end, and then said simply—

"The outlook is bad enough, no doubt; but until we see exactly how we stand of course there is no use in making projects for

the future. At present it is impossible to say what the result will be. There may be a sum remaining that will be sufficient to provide an income—a very narrow one, of course; or, everything may have to go, even down to the very furniture. We can't settle anything till we are in possession of the balance-sheet, so to speak. Then we shall be able to see our way and make our arrangements accordingly."

"And what are we to do in the meantime?" ejaculated Mr. Palliser, feeling that Gerard was at least as able as himself to cope with the difficulties of the position.

"My advice would be to put your affairs into a lawyer's hands at once," said Gerard promptly.

"Ah, do, Marmaduke!" exclaimed Mrs. Palliser, with more animation than she had shown since the trouble had come upon her. "I shall feel so much safer—it will be a sort of protection to us, you know. We're not very clever at managing our own affairs, I'm

afraid, and a nice, sharp, honest lawyer might be able to prevent us from being taken advantage of by some of these wicked, dishonest companies, you know, and save something for us that we might lose ourselves. Yes, that is a good suggestion of dear Gerard's. I think it's the best thing that we could do."

"At any rate it can't do any harm," replied her husband. "I'll go to town to-morrow and see Harwood the first thing. Dishonest companies? My word, you may well call them that. I shouldn't wonder a bit, now, if their very suspension were some sort of swindle to make more money. I've heard of such things. A man told me once he knew of a great tallow-merchant who suddenly suspended payment, ruined any number of other people, went through the Court and got whitewashed, and then started in business again a richer man than ever! Yes, I'll get Harwood to go into the whole affair—look up their books and their deeds of settlement

and all—and, my word! have everything in black and white before we pay any one of 'em a farthing. Gerard, you're a shrewd lad after all, my boy, and I only wish I'd got you a good appointment in the City years ago, where your capacities would have had some scope."

The good gentleman's inherent sanguineness now came once more to the front, and he began to feel more hopeful. Even Mrs. Palliser picked up a bit, and was able to eat a little dinner with a fair show of appetite; but Gerard was taciturn and depressed. He had small hopes of any favourable 'balance-sheet,' to use his own expression. He took a very serious view of the situation, and did not indulge himself in illusions, however plausible they might seem. But he was glad his father had adopted his advice so readily. It was important, in his eyes, that no time should be lost in discovering the actual position in which they stood, so that the future might be faced and arranged for.

The suspense meanwhile was cruel, and he was anxious that it should be shortened as much as possible.

"Yes," said Mr. Palliser, pouring out his second glass of port, "I've been in straits before this, and managed to pull through somehow. Of course things are much more serious now—I don't deny that—but still, while there's life there's hope, and I don't intend to go down without a struggle of some sort to keep myself afloat. I always think, you know, that troubles and perplexities are like those bays and lochs on the west coast of Scotland—they look completely landlocked, and you'd be ready to swear that there couldn't possibly be a way out of 'em; and yet when you get on a little further, why, there's the opening right in front of you! I shouldn't wonder a bit if that turned out to be the case now. Things look bad, but we can't say there's no way out of the difficulty until we come to try. And if the worst comes to the worst, I shall just put my

shoulder to the wheel. I've worked before, and I don't see why I shouldn't work again. A man o' my experience in life ought to be able to do something, and be of use to somebody. And it isn't as though I didn't know anybody, either. I've been a City man all my life, in a sense. There are scores of influential men within five hundred yards' radius o' Capel Court who remember Palliser & Co., and who'd vie with each other—literally vie with each other—to give a hand to old Palliser's son for his father's sake. A man told me the other day that the City was being positively overrun with youngsters, and principals were getting sick of it. The great need now is for elderly men of solid character and practical knowledge of the world. Ah, all this upset will lead to great reforms in commercial life, depend upon it, and not before they're wanted either. Things have been getting into a rotten condition for years past—insolvent firms being bolstered up by banks

that held their paper, houses living from hand to mouth on their commission account, men of straw keeping themselves afloat by the pig-upon-pork dodge—bah! it wanted something like this to clear the air. Let us once pull through the present crisis, and we shall soon see better times."

Thus did Mr. Palliser console himself and his wife on the night of Gerard's return.

CHAPTER VI.

AN ARROW SHOT AT A VENTURE.

DR. LANCASTER made no allusion to the absorbing topic which now occupied his thoughts when next he visited Mrs. Jickling. Indeed he had no excuse for doing so. In the first place, curious as it was that Madame Mirabel should not have mentioned her mother's presence in Lucerne, there seemed nothing to connect the fact with the circumstances which were still perplexing him; nor did he feel himself justified, at that particular stage, in requesting an explanation from Madame Mirabel. In the second place, his patient demanded all the attention he could bestow upon her.

She was really, though not dangerously, ill; ill enough to necessitate the greatest possible care, if pneumonia was to be averted, and as long as she was in that state he felt powerless to learn more. But that there was more to be learnt he gradually became persuaded. Why, he could not tell. He did not for a moment suspect Madame Mirabel of knowing more than she cared to confess. To him she was still a bright, strong, beautiful woman, who had been a heroine among wives, and who was now betraying a tenderness of feeling towards himself. At the same time the coincidence, as she had said, was peculiar.

The change in his manner towards her, though perceptible for a day or two, was extremely slight. There was no coldness or formality; but there was just that faint suspicion of reserve which springs from the consciousness of a moot point between two otherwise confidential friends,—a problem which a word from one of them would

explain at once, but which is always carefully ignored. Lancaster felt just a little sore at this. Of course it was of no great consequence, either way; she had not been bound to tell him that her mother was at Lucerne, nor had he any right to expect it; still, she might have done so, just as she might now allude to the affair—only she never did. Apart from this, however, their relations continued as before. He brought her a book or two from his library, and had his tea with her in the drawing-room, and, as he had himself expressed it, suffered himself to drift. It was very pleasant while it lasted. He was in the hands of one of the cleverest of women, who watched every play of his eye, and adapted herself to it unerringly. She always said the right word in the right place, did the thing most calculated to soothe or humour him as occasion for it arose, exercised that indescribable and consummate charm which only a woman who has the most perfect breeding at

command possesses, and, in short, kept him well in hand. Any show of passion, any approach to demonstrativeness, any use of the more vulgar arts of 'flirting,' properly so called, would have been as impossible to her as disgusting to him. There was an instinctive refinement in her that no depravity could touch, and her influence over Lancaster was a magic of the very subtlest kind.

And Lancaster *did* drift. How far, indeed, he had drifted he did not suspect, until one afternoon, when the exchange of a look, the half-unconscious uttering of a monosyllable, revealed to him his position. And she saw it, and was glad. "He loves me," she said to herself. "He loves me, and now he knows it." The battle was virtually won; she had triumphed, the prize was within her grasp. It was nothing to her that he got up a moment afterwards and said he must be going. She was too wise to detain him. He went away, feeling that he no longer

was his own. For weal or woe, it seemed to him, his fate was irrevocably sealed.

For an hour she never stirred. It cannot be denied that, ever since the recognition between Lancaster and Mrs. Jickling, she had been terribly anxious. But day had succeeded day, and the dreaded disclosure had not come. Lancaster's manner at first had been, perhaps, a trifle reserved, a trifle diffident; but he had made no further allusion to the point, and had apparently dismissed it from his mind. It was so, it must be so! And now he had gone too far ever to recede. Unconsciously he had betrayed his love; the moment after he knew that he had done so, and now, at last, they understood each other. The next step was to put the sea between her mother and themselves. Mrs. Jickling was now improving steadily; in a fortnight, at the outside, she should be safe in Heidelberg.

"I suppose it is to be," thought Lancaster that evening, as he slowly paced his study.

"I can scarcely recede now. I wonder whether I would if I could? No—after all, a lonely life is never an ideal life. And, as she said, it is unwise to sacrifice one's whole future to the past. Of course there are things in her I could wish a little different. That hard, uncompromising atheism is unlovely enough. It grates upon me to see her utter blindness to the spiritual side of life. I wonder whether there is any true sympathy between us?"

He paused in his walk, and a soft, far-away look came into his eyes. "O Edith, Edith!" he breathed. It was a dangerous moment for Julia. Then he threw himself into his reading-chair, and began slowly stuffing his pipe.

"What question should a man put to himself in such a position as mine?" he soliloquized, as the blue wreaths curled upward. "There must be some test which is infallible. Some men ask themselves, 'Can I live with her?' and if the answer is 'Yes' they con-

sider the matter settled. But that won't do. The true enquiry should be 'Can I live without her?' and only if the answer is 'No' is it safe and right to marry. How is it, I wonder, with myself?"

Then his thoughts turned to Mrs. Jickling. "Certainly, Heidelberg is the best place for her," he muttered with a humorous smile. "What a strange mother for such a daughter! She looks as though she had had a hard life of it, poor old woman—poor old compaigner—must have lived by her wits, I should think, if those cunning eyes mean anything. I suppose she was handsome as a girl—her profile is not bad even now."

By a natural association his mind turned at this juncture to the old worry, the old puzzle, and he relapsed into a very brown study indeed. The idea came across him that he ought not to marry Madame Mirabel until the mystery attending her late husband's death had been cleared up. There seemed no special reason why this was so, for no

blame could possibly attach to either him or her; it was a feeling, an instinct, merely. Suddenly a great change came over his face —a look of excitement, the look of a man who has had an unexpected revelation, who has found a clue, to whom a thought has occurred which had never occurred to him before. He sprang up, passed his hand over his eyes, and began once more to pace the room. "My God!" he exclaimed. "How is it I never remembered that till now?"

It had just flashed upon him that he *had* told somebody of the projected Mattei conference at Lucerne; and that that somebody was Madame Mirabel. True, when he mentioned the receipt of the telegram to her the evening before he left, she looked perfectly vague and blank; said she had never heard of the matter at all, and had no recollection of his having told her of it. He had been a little surprised at her lapse of memory, but never thought any more about it; it was a little curious, certainly, that it

should have passed so completely from her mind, but no one can remember everything, and if she had forgotten she had forgotten. It was strange, however, that this incident should have remained so long and so completely out of his own thoughts.

"She was the only person to whom I ever said a word about it," he said, throwing himself back in his chair; "the only person. Of course there might have been somebody in Lucerne who knew about it. Why did she never mention the fact she had a mother staying there? God grant I may be on a false scent. What possible *reason* could she have?"

Unconsciously his hand fell upon the book which lay beside him. He opened it at the page that had arrested his attention before—the page disfigured with those long, thick, pencil-marks.

"*. . . while in cases of actual malevolence, the power may be used for the illicit subjugation of the patient's will, and even for the extinction, instead of the resuscitation, of his vitality. In short, hypnotism may be employed as the instrument of . . .*"

He threw the book from him with the nearest approach to an oath that had ever crossed his lips. "That way madness lies," he said aloud. "I'm making a bungle of the whole business. Evidently nature never intended me for a detective. I should like to lay the affair before some shrewd man whose mind has been trained in that direction—some man who would show me how absurdly wrong I am, and put his finger on the real clue. I'm all astray, and had better give it up."

Brave words, but his heart was sinking all the time. He knew that he could not give up the quest now—that it must be followed to the bitter end. And the prospect filled him with dismay. He seriously entertained the idea of running up to town in order to take a certain old chum of his into confidence, and ask him his opinion—the burden had suddenly grown so much heavier than it was before, and his friend, who was practised in criminal law, might relieve him of it. In

the middle of his cogitations he was called out to see a child with croup, and he was glad of the interruption. The case occupied his attention for some hours, and it was nearly two when he returned. He felt healthily fatigued, and fell asleep as soon as he got into bed.

The next morning he arose refreshed in mind and body. He fancied he must have been morbid over-night. A new, fair, happy life was opening before him; why should he cloud his own prospects with conceits as horrible as they were absurd? The sun was shining, and the wind whistling merrily through the fir-trees on the moor. It was a golden day, and it had its effect on Lancaster. He felt degrees more hopeful, more buoyant, than on the previous evening.

But as the forenoon advanced the old train of thought rushed back, and it occurred to him that he would try once more for a solution. Anything was better than this uncertainty. A certain impulse came over him,

and he yielded to it on the instant. Contrary as it was to his usual practice, he drove to Gorse Cottage about eleven o'clock instead of waiting till five. Madame Mirabel, not expecting him, was out, and he went straight up to Mrs. Jickling's room.

"Well, and how are you feeling to-day?" he said, taking a seat beside her. "I don't generally call in the morning, so perhaps I've taken you a little unawares. You're looking pretty well, it seems to me."

"Ay, ay, doctor, you certainly 'ave pulled me through wonderful," replied Mrs. Jickling, settling the shawl upon her shoulders. "I thought I was in for a bad time of it. I'm in hopes of gettin' out a bit before long."

"Yes, I think you've had an escape," said Lancaster. "It might very easily have settled upon your lungs, and then things might have become serious. As it is, you'll do very well. Your constitution was in your favour."

"I was always pretty wiry," remarked

Mrs. Jickling with a complacent air. "I'm expecting to go abroad before long, as I dare say Julia's told you. It's a fine place, Heidelberg, I'm thinkin'?"

"A charming town," said Lancaster. "Yes, I should think you'd be very comfortable there. You've been abroad before, you know, so continental life won't be strange to you. But of course Heidelberg is very different from Lucerne."

Mrs. Jickling made no reply to this. She was looking a little absent, as though her thoughts were wandering. In a moment or two she said—

"Oh, I shall do well enough. I come of a hearty stock, and can put up wi' most things. But I tell you what, doctor—I'm not over and above easy about Julia. Ha'n't you *noticed* anything about her, this last week or two?"

"In what way?" enquired Lancaster, rather startled.

"Well, *you* know she 'ad a faintin' fit not so

very long ago," replied Mrs. Jickling, nodding her head mysteriously. "*I* heard all about it, though she was so close. And then look at 'er face! She's that pale and thin you'd think she was goin' into a decline; and them dark hollers under 'er eyes, they tells a tale, too—though what that tale may be *I* don't know. But there's something wrong with her, doctor. She ain't what she used to be. I've thought now and again as there must be something on her mind. She don't eat enough not to keep a mouse alive, and as for sleeping—well, what makes 'er go wanderin' about the 'ouse at night, when folks ought to be in their honest beds? That's what *I* want to know. No, doctor, you may say what you like, but a mother's not to be deceived. Julia's ill, and nothing 'll make me believe she ain't. There's something desperate wrong with her, that's *my* belief, and now as I'm as good as off your hands I wish as you'd just look after her a bit."

Lancaster knitted his brows. "Certainly, I've noticed indications of weakness," he said, with professional reserve; "a want of tone, in fact. But I have no reason to suppose that there is any deep-seated mischief. Her spirits appear to me excellent, which is always a good sign. As for the restlessness at night—that, of course, I did not know. I am sorry to hear of it. But I don't think she has anything on her mind. What can she have? Of course she has been through a great deal during the last six months or so—we all know that. No—I'm in hopes that she has many very happy years before her. At any rate, there's one thing in her favour—she seems to have inherited your own most excellent constitution."

And yet Mrs. Jickling's words had rendered Lancaster vaguely uneasy. Why should Madame Mirabel wander about the house at night? What made her mother think she must have something on her mind? Again his thoughts began to set in

the direction he was most anxious to avoid. Again the torturing suspicion, the vague, horrible uncertainty, began to make itself felt. And he was not the man to shrink from pain if the pain were necessary. There was an opportunity for him, here and now, to discover a part of the truth.

"Well, just you keep an eye on her," said Mrs. Jickling, shortly.

Then Lancaster braced himself to speak. "Wasn't it very curious," he said, "that we should have met so casually at Lucerne, without either of us knowing who the other was?"

The suddenness of the attack took Mrs. Jickling off her guard. She started visibly at the change of subject, administered a feeble and quite unnecessary poke to the fire, and muttered an almost inarticulate assent.

"Still more curious," pursued the doctor, "that Madame Mirabel, when I conversed freely with her just before I left, should

never have told me that she had a mother staying there?"

"I never did understand Julia," said Mrs. Jickling, feeling vaguely uncomfortable.

"I suppose you went to Switzerland for change of air," continued Lancaster, fixing his dark eyes on the old woman's face. "It's a charming place, and I enjoyed my stay there very much. I should have enjoyed it still more, had it not been that I found myself confronted with a great difficulty—an insoluble puzzle—that detracted very considerably from my pleasure."

"Yes?" murmured Mrs. Jickling, almost inaudibly.

"It was connected with a telegram," said Lancaster, bringing out the words with unusual distinctness. "I went there in consequence of a telegram, purporting to come from a friend of mine named Dr. Bretschneider, and urging me to meet him there without delay. I started at once, and arrived on a Monday afternoon—the after-

noon, in fact, when you and I happened to fall in with each other. Judge, then, of my astonishment, when I found that Dr. Bretschneider was not in Lucerne at all, and had not been there for a month!"

"You don't say," was all that the old woman managed to gasp out.

"The telegram was a forgery," resumed Lancaster with his sternest air, "and the sender of it is liable, if ever he is discovered, to a term of penal servitude. I found that I had been decoyed from home, by some wicked and malicious person, for purposes that I do not pretend to fathom. But the result—shall I tell you what the result was, Mrs. Jickling? Nothing less than the death of your poor son-in-law, Gaston Mirabel!"

Mrs. Jickling's mouth and eyes were open, and her breath came quick and short; but she answered never a word.

"Yes, Mirabel was doing well when I left," said Lancaster in a quieter tone, "and if I had stayed with him I believe he would

never have died. The exact cause of his death is still a mystery to me, and it is unnecessary for me to say any more about it. Let it suffice that if I had not been made the victim of this cruel hoax, or conspiracy, or fraud, I could have prevented it, and he would in all probability have been alive to-day. You see, then," he added, "what terrible associations the very name of Lucerne has for me. I can never think of it without a shudder; and I will never rest until I have discovered the perpetrator of the deed."

So far, Lancaster had been "going it blind." He had no evidence worth the name for connecting Mrs. Jickling with the conspiracy. He had no right to accuse her, nor could he imagine what possible motive there could have been for the cruel fraud which had cost Mirabel his life, on the supposition that these women had had a hand in it. There were only three facts to go upon—the presence of Mrs. Jickling in

Lucerne at the very time the telegram was sent, the concealment of this on the part of Madame Mirabel, and Madame Mirabel's previous and exclusive knowledge of the proposed conference; and after all, what did they amount to when weighed against the enormous improbabilities of the conclusion they suggested? But now, the shrinking, terrified expression on the face of the old woman startled him, and went far towards confirming him in his suspicions. He had drawn his bow at a venture, trusting he might hit nothing; but lo! the arrow seemed quivering in the very bull's-eye. It was only at the expense of a tremendous effort that he succeeded in suppressing the horror he now felt. He kept silence for some seconds, his eyes fixed on the cowering figure before him. Then he said, in a voice he scarcely recognized as his own,—

"How much do you know about this business, Mrs. Jickling?"

"Don't ask me!" cried the old woman,

throwing up her hands with a despairing wail. "Oh, to think of it—to think of it! And I that blind and innocent,—how should *I* 'ave guessed? I don't know nothin', doctor —I can't tell you nothin'. What do you mean by talkin' to me like this?"

Lancaster turned pale to the very lips.

"If you know nothing of it, I cannot see why you should distress yourself about it," he replied, with great coldness. "Come, be frank with me. You sent that telegram, did you not?"

She only groaned.

"And I am willing to believe you did so ignorantly," continued Lancaster. "Of course, somebody must have employed you, I presume. I cannot imagine that, knowing nothing of me or of my circumstances, you can have acted independently in the affair. In God's name tell me the whole story, as far as you know it yourself. It is the only reparation you can make."

Dead silence. She neither moved nor

spoke. Lancaster waited for a denial, but none came. Then he rose slowly, and began to draw on his gloves.

"This is very terrible," he said, standing erect before her. "You have betrayed yourself; you have not denied the charge; you have confirmed my worst suspicions. Still, I may even now be doing you injustice. Answer me—speak to me—tell me I am wrong. There is still a chance for you."

There was no reply. She only wrung her withered hands together and bit her lips convulsively. Lancaster had no longer any room for doubt.

"If I may advise you, Mrs. Jickling, you will say nothing of all this to Madame Mirabel," he said, taking up his hat. "This is in your own interest as well as hers." Then he passed out of the room without further leave-taking, looking like a man under the influence of some appalling dream.

Dr. Charlton lived about two miles off, and Lancaster, glancing at his watch, calcu-

lated that he would be just in time to catch him before lunch. The two men were not on very confidential terms. Charlton was inferior to Lancaster in more ways than one; a respectable country practitioner, but scarcely a man to be trusted alone in any case requiring exceptional skill or science. Just now, however, it was he and he alone who could furnish Lancaster with the information that he required.

He was in his small consulting-room, washing his hands with his coat off, when Lancaster was shown in. Something in the face of the latter arrested his attention, and he wondered for a moment whether Lancaster had some interesting case in hand in which his assistance was to be asked for. He looked quickly up, and gave his brother medico a welcome in which professional cordiality was diplomatically tempered with an unmistakeable show of deference. Dr. Lancaster was a "cut above him," and he knew it.

"Charlton," said Lancaster, as soon as they were both seated, "I've come to ask your help in a matter which I had hoped it would not be necessary to bother you about again. I refer to the case of Mirabel. I know you've had trouble enough in connection with it, and I really feel I owe you an apology for re-opening the subject; but there is no help for it. Just let me go over your memoranda again, will you? I have lately stumbled upon something which I think may throw an entirely new light upon the symptoms, and I want to check your diagnosis by the theories that I've come across."

The other looked surprised, but was all compliance. "Why certainly, Dr. Lancaster," he said, selecting a manuscript book and turning over its pages. "A very sad case that was—very sad indeed. There wasn't anything to be done, you know. You couldn't have done anything yourself if you'd been here. Ah—here it is. It begins

just there. You must know it as well as I do by this time, I should think."

"Thank you very much," replied Lancaster, taking the book, and studying the page intently. "Yes, yes—as you say, I know it all pretty well by heart. But I want to apply a test to it that I was not in a position to do before." He drew a sheet of paper from his pocket, closely written. It was a transcript from a certain chapter of Streich's Hypnotism, and dealt with the symptoms resulting from the employment of the hypnotic power to destroy, instead of to increase, vitality. He compared the two for some time, frowning darkly. Then he said,—

"Thanks. And now just answer me one or two questions that had not suggested themselves to me when we last conferred together."

Charlton, greatly wondering, at once complied. Their colloquy lasted half an hour, and left him considerably puzzled; he could not for the life of him imagine what

Lancaster was driving at. Just as he was going away the latter said,—

"And you're perfectly sure that his wife was the only person, in the house or out of it, who had any access to Mirabel?"

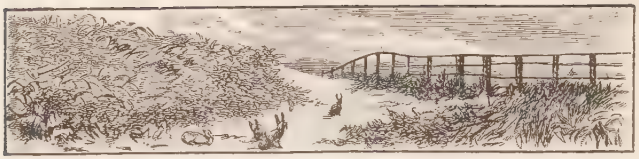
"As sure as I can be of anything," replied Charlton. "The servants were never allowed to go near him towards the end. Young Palliser saw him once or twice, I believe, but only for a few moments. She was with him all the time, and did everything for him."

Lancaster did not linger. He was anxious to be alone, and to go over the whole thing in his own mind. Charlton's replies and notes were not such as could be held to constitute the clear proof required, independent of other circumstances; but they afforded grounds for presumptions of the very gravest nature, and coincided with much that could scarcely be otherwise accounted for.

He spent the afternoon in visiting patients,

and the occupation was beneficial to him, as it afforded that temporary change in the direction of his thoughts that he needed after the emotions of the morning; but his mind was only half in the work. He was in a suppressed fever of excitement all the time. He pictured to himself the calm, pale, beautiful face of the woman who had conquered him—so strong, so full of intellect, yet softened with such exquisite gleams of tenderness—and wondered what lay beneath it. What was she, in her real self? Had she a soul, a heart, a capacity for unselfish love, or was she only a beautiful vampire? Would this terrible cloud of suspicion pass away and leave them basking in the pure sunlight of perfect confidence, or were they to be separated at once, irrevocably, and for ever? And if she *were* guilty, what was he to do? His whole soul shrank from the problems he saw presenting themselves for his solution, and for some hours he found himself sinking into the very depths of moral

cowardice. Still, she had only conquered him; she had not enslaved him. He was still in possession of his faculties, his judgment, his moral sense. There should be no haste, no premature accusation. He would give her the fullest and freest opportunities for whatever explanations she might have to offer,—would hear her own story if only she could be induced to tell it, and interpret everything in her favour that could be so interpreted. His worst fears might be justified, and complete acquittal, it seemed, there could not possibly be. But the time for hesitancy was over. The woman must be put to the proof, and he and she together would have to abide by the result.



CHAPTER VII.

THE AWAKENING OF GERARD.

THE abject condition of remorse, terror, and despair into which Mrs. Jickling sank as the door closed behind Dr. Lancaster may be better imagined than described. At the time she consented to do what her daughter required of her for the sake of a holiday in Switzerland she had troubled her head very little about the nature of the undertaking. It was clear to her, of course, that "Julia was up to something," and that was all she knew or cared to know; Julia, she had argued, was old enough and shrewd enough to be well aware what she was about, and as for herself—well, she was

going to have a lovely time, and play the lady with the best of them. In fact, she soon ceased to think anything about it at all, and it was only when she was confronted, months after the occurrence, with the very man to whom the false message had been sent, that she began to feel uneasy and inquisitive. But what was that uneasiness when compared to the horror which overwhelmed her now? She had been nothing less than an accomplice in a crime for which she might yet stand in the dock. She had suffered herself to be the instrument of a deed that had resulted in the death of her own son-in-law. Had he been murdered? Had Julia wanted him to die? Why had she committed a fraud in order to separate him from his doctor? Of course she herself had not known that Lancaster was a doctor at all. To her the name was nothing but a word in the telegram. And there was nothing in the telegram itself to suggest that the slightest harm was intended to

anybody, least of all to Mirabel, the idea of whose connection with the matter never entered her head. Now, for the first time, she saw the terribleness of her act, and the terribleness of her position, and the vision that rose before her was a very ghastly one.

She was a bad old woman, but she was not wholly bad. She was unscrupulous enough up to a certain point, but the idea of actual crime was something quite beyond her calculations, and she was honestly appalled at the wickedness at which she had connived. And now, what was she to do? Here she felt entirely at sea. At one moment it seemed to her that her best course was to make a clean breast of her detection to Julia, and urge the instant flight of both. The next moment she shrank in terror from making the avowal; she feared the wrath of Julia as a frightened child fears that of a despotic schoolmaster, or an offending hound the whip; she dared not brave her fury. But, with this, arose a passion of

fierce anger against the woman who had so abused her innocence. She, at any rate, had sinned unwittingly; but she had been made a catspaw, and had incurred most serious guilt; by what right had Julia thus involved her in her own destruction? Alas, her hands were tied, for apart from Julia she had no means of subsistence, and grievously as Julia had behaved to her she might lose all by quarrelling with her now; and then there would be no gay life in Heidelberg, no more dainty dinners or black velvet gowns—nothing but the hardest and most sordid penury, a pittance not sufficient to keep her body and her soul together; even *if* they escaped the dock! A thousand times the miserable old woman cursed and bemoaned her folly. She had been the means of procuring Gaston's death, and the penalty was now to be exacted.

It may well be supposed that Madame Mirabel, when she came in half an hour later, did not find her mother in a par-

ticularly cordial or expansive mood. In fact her manners were extremely dry, and her aspect generally morose; which Madame Mirabel, being accustomed to the old woman's somewhat uncertain temper, and not caring whether she was cross or not, paid little or no attention to. She was surprised, however, to hear that Dr. Lancaster had already been, as his habit was to pay visits in the afternoon; but heard with some complacency that his opinion of the patient was distinctly favourable, and that he had advised as early a removal to Heidelberg as could conveniently be arranged. It will be seen that Mrs. Jickling's version of what the doctor had said was somewhat over-coloured; but in her desperate anxiety to put the seas between herself and the man she had so deeply offended and deceived she did not hesitate for a moment to distort the truth. She felt that if once she was out of England the chances of Julia knowing the part she had

played in enlightening Lancaster would be materially diminished; her own safety, too, would be to some extent ensured; while Julia was quite clever enough to deal with any complications that might threaten her without the assistance of any one. Of her daughter's object throughout all—the prize on which she had staked so much — she knew and she guessed nothing.

That evening Madame Mirabel wrote to the Pension Scheibler at Heidelberg and said that Mrs. Jickling thought of starting within a week at the outside. Her mother, she added, was just recovering from severe indisposition and would require a little extra care and attention for some time; the day of her departure would be communicated as soon as possible, in order that everything might be in readiness on her arrival. In this, it will be understood, Madame Mirabel was acting in perfectly good faith. She had no reason to doubt that Lancaster had really authorized her mother's almost immediate removal, and

the satisfaction which Mrs. Jickling expressed on hearing that the letter had been written was no less than her own in being in a position to write it. Her happiness was now approaching fast. Her last interview with Lancaster had been virtually decisive; the next could have only one result.

And yet for three days Lancaster never came. It was curious; she wondered a little how it was, and could only suppose that he was unusually busy. There was nothing, however, to make her feel uneasy. The only danger she had ever really feared had come and gone, and it was since then that her relations with Lancaster had become so tender and so close. No, she feared nothing, suspected nothing. Mrs. Jickling had kept her own counsel well, and Madame Mirabel walked on air.

It was about a fortnight after the crisis in the City that, as Lancaster was sitting in his consulting-room, he was surprised by a visit from Gerard. The doctor was just then in

the very depth of his trouble and perplexity—unable to make up his mind what to do, distressed by the weight of responsibility which his overwhelming suspicions had laid upon him, and crushed under the sense of blended abhorrence and disappointment. He looked sharply up as Gerard was announced, and his trained glance at once recognized the presence of 'something wrong' in the lad's face. Here was somebody who was in trouble as well as himself. Even if one's own sorrows are incurable, one may always do something to alleviate those of others.

"Sit down, Gerard," he said, rising with his kindliest smile. "I have scarcely seen you for weeks, and I'm very glad to see you now. How are you, and how is everybody at home?"

Gerard responded to the other's greeting somewhat absently. "I'm—we're—pretty well, I think, thanks," he said, taking the seat that Lancaster offered him. "Of course one can't expect to be very cheerful, under the circumstances."

"Ah!" breathed Lancaster, sympathizingly. "I did hear something—but hoped that reports were exaggerated. Are things really so very bad?"

"Yes, they are—very bad," said Gerard. "In fact I've come"——

"Have a whiskey and seltzer," interrupted the doctor, jumping up. "You're looking as white as a ghost. Do you like a pipe or a cigar best? A pipe—so do I. There's the baccy, and there are the matches. Well now, let's hear. Things are seldom so bad but what they might be worse."

He soon provided Gerard with a big tumbler of the sparkling stimulant, and took a smaller one himself. Gerard drank two or three gulps eagerly, and lighted his pipe, smoking on for a few minutes in silence. Lancaster said nothing, wishing to let him take all the time he wanted. At last he resumed his statement.

"The fact is, Lancaster, that there has been a general burst-up. It's been threaten-

ing for months, and now it has come. My mother wrote to me when I was in Somersetshire, telling me of it. Of course I returned at once, and found them all at loose ends, so to speak. They hadn't a notion how they stood, and were full of the very vaguest plans. I suggested to my father that the sooner he put his affairs into the hands of his lawyer the better. Well, he did so. The whole thing has been properly gone into, and the result is that, as far as we can see, we shall be very lucky if we save the furniture."

"Is that so really?" exclaimed Lancaster in dismay.

"That is the simple fact," replied Gerard, "and we have to face it. Of course it's a tremendous blow. They were hoping there'd still be something left—some narrow income, on which they could manage to scrape along. But there's nothing—absolutely nothing. It's hard on all of us, I tell you."

"But surely, your grandmother"—began Lancaster.

"I'm coming to that," said Gerard, sipping his liquor and putting down the glass. "Just now my father is as full of projects as he can be. He's been writing letters all the morning, trying to get some situation or other. He says he'll take anything that's offered—a clerkship at a hundred and fifty pounds a year, even, if he can't get anything better, though he hopes for a great deal more than that. You know how sanguine he is. He positively believes he'll be overwhelmed with offers, and be able to pick and choose. Well, you know, I don't. I don't believe anything of the sort. I don't believe, myself, he'll get any offer at all. He knows nothing whatever of routine work, and it's difficult to see what use he'd be to any one—except to travel about the country puffing a patent corn-destroyer, or bread pills for rejuvenating old women, or some such rot. He might do well at that, because he'd believe in it so thoroughly himself."

Lancaster laughed slightly, puffing up his pipe.

"Why, only this morning, he applied for the agency of some concern or other for extracting quicksilver from mangold-wurzels," pursued Gerard, "and if he had his money back to-morrow I believe he'd put a lot of it into that very swindle. The truth is, Lancaster, he has no more judgment than a child in such matters, and the less he has to do with business the better. In the meantime, however, something must be done."

The doctor glanced curiously at Gerard, and made no answer.

"You know," he resumed, "that when my grandmother died she left me all her money. There's about eight thousand pounds, I believe, invested in good mortgages at four per cent., besides several hundreds lying loose. At one time, when it looked as though my father's liabilities would prove heavier than the amount of his assets, it occurred to me to come to the rescue with

this sum. But then, where would have been the good? I shouldn't have benefited *him* one bit; everything would have been sacrificed, and none of us a penny the better. I have fully made up my mind not to spend a stiver in liquidating his affairs; I see no reason why I should. If he can't pay all he owes, he can't, and so much the worse for his creditors. But I entirely fail to see why I should sacrifice a single penny to help *them*."

"Certainly not," assented Lancaster, nodding.

"Therefore," continued Gerard, "and for other reasons which will no doubt occur to you, I don't intend to disturb the mortgages. The money is safe now, whereas if I were ever to let my poor father get hold of it there'd soon be little enough left—he'd give it away to the first man in the street who asked him for it. My plan, then, is this—to let them live on the interest; and I want you —I myself being absent—to accept my power

of attorney, receive the interest as it falls due, and pay it over to them every quarter."

Lancaster had been waiting rather curiously to know what all this was to lead to. He now heard Gerard's proposal with unqualified approval and satisfaction, though he abstained from saying so at once. "There's sterling metal in the lad after all," he thought to himself, "and he's far from being a fool, too." But he only answered,—

"Let's hear a little more first, Gerard. What need will there be for an attorney? Where will you be yourself?"

"Well," replied the lad slowly, "that is a matter on which I am going to ask your help. It won't do for the old people and me to live together under our new circumstances. It won't do for them to feel that they're my guests, so to speak; it would embitter their whole lives. You see I should be really boss of the whole show, and have a right to order everything according to my own ideas; and the situation would be impossible, after

what they've been accustomed to. The only thing for me is to make myself scarce, and I intend to do it."

Lancaster was much moved. "It seems to me that you will be a greater sufferer by your father's ruin than he'll be himself," he said gently.

"That is inevitable," replied Gerard with a slight smile. "Of course the whole vision of my future life has collapsed. I had formed plans of usefulness and pleasure which are now out of the question. It's difficult to realize this sometimes—difficult to reconcile myself to it. But it has to be done, and there's no use maundering. What I want to know, then, is this—Can you get me a position on that Leper Settlement in Saghalien?"

"Saghalien!" shouted Lancaster aghast. "Are you serious, man? Do you know what you are thinking of?"

"I am perfectly serious," said Gerard. "I mean that Secular Mission you were telling

us about, you remember. I shan't want any pay. I shall have a little ready money, and I dare say the odd £20 over the three hundred will suffice for my necessaries—they'll be able to spare me that. Don't make any difficulties, please; there'll be difficulty enough with my mother as it is, and what I want now is help."

"I'm not at all sure that I *shall* help you," said the doctor with a thoughtful frown. "I don't believe it would be right. Of course you're your own master, and can shape your own course—but what makes you think of Saghalien? No, Gerard, think better of it. Think of the isolation, the dreariness, the risks—for there are risks, you know—why, it may involve the upset of your whole life! For God's sake don't act rashly. You may have the most serious cause to regret it. And there's no necessity for it either. A fellow with a University education and something to stand by in the meantime—for it isn't as if you were destitute—can easily find

good work to do in England. Why should you sacrifice yourself on the spur of the moment for such a fad as this ?"

"You didn't call it a fad when you were telling us about it that day," replied Gerard.

"But it's such a terrible renunciation of everything!" exclaimed Lancaster, passing by the thrust in his excitement.

"No!" said Gerard, rising from his seat. "It hasn't even *that* merit. If I had decided upon taking this step when everything was prosperous—when my fortune was my own, and prospects of happiness in other directions not entirely unfavourable perhaps —*then* there might have been renunciation. Then there might have been some moral value in my action. But I didn't do so. I cherished plans and hopes that, whether useful to others or not, at any rate were pleasant to myself. It is only when I find myself stripped of everything, when I've nothing left to renounce, that I decide upon

what you call renunciation. So you see I haven't even the consolation of self-approval. Come, Lancaster, don't make it harder for me than it is. My mind is quite made up, and if you won't help me I shall have to look out for somebody who will."

For some minutes Lancaster made no reply. The proposed sacrifice of this young lad seemed to him too cruel; he could not make up his mind to have part or lot in it. Besides, there were the parents to be considered. Was he justified, he asked himself, in helping to deprive them of their only son? Was it right, that he should lend his aid to a scheme for separating a family which had just undergone almost total ruin? His whole soul rebelled against it. He agreed with Gerard that there might be inconveniences attending their continued residence under the same roof; but the Leper Settlement at Saghalien!—it was horrible to think of, besides being so entirely unnecessary. In Gerard's present mood, however, it would

not do to thwart him, and the doctor came to the conclusion that he would temporize.

"Well, Gerard," he said at last, "at any rate I won't refuse. It's no use attempting to dissuade you—I see that very well; I only stipulate for time. There's no hurry. The Mission won't be starting for a month yet. In the meanwhile, think the whole matter over very carefully. You fancy you've done so already, I know; but one can't consider a thing of this sort too much before deciding definitely. There are your parents to be dealt with, you know. It certainly would not be your duty to take this step without consulting them. It's all very well to go and help the lepers; but how if you can't do that without half breaking your mother's heart?"

"I don't think there's any fear of that," said Gerard, reflectively. "My mother's feelings are quick and sharp—they don't go very deep down, I fancy. I know exactly how she'll take it. She'll cry out that she

never heard of such a thing since she was born, and that I must be mad to think of it; and then she'll begin to ask all sorts of questions about it, and finish up by wanting to know how soon I'm going to start. Of course they won't like my going, and no doubt they'll oppose it just at first; but in a day or two they'll be quite reconciled to it. Meantime I shall be looking out for a house for them, and that will take off their attention, you know. I'm sure I may count upon you to look after them when I'm away."

His voice trembled ever so little as he said this. It all meant so much more to him than Lancaster imagined. There was an even bitterer drop in his cup of renunciation than the mere sacrifice of fortune, or abandonment of country, or loss of the woman he loved—for of course he never dreamt of persisting in his love-suit now that he had no income for himself. The frequency of Lancaster's visits to Gorse Cottage had not passed unnoticed in the neighbourhood, and

Gerard was aware of it. The old, vague jealousy once more sprang up, and he thought he saw in Lancaster the favoured rival who would ultimately reap the harvest of high happiness into which he had put his own sickle. It was only one pang more; but still it made him wince.

"That I promise you," said Lancaster.

Neither spoke for some minutes after this. At last Gerard said—yielding to an uncontrollable impulse—

"Going away is never so disagreeable in itself; it's the leave-taking that I bar."

Lancaster looked surprised. "You're not going to disappear all of a sudden, I hope, without saying good-bye to anybody, are you?" he said with the slightest possible laugh.

"There are not many people to say good-bye to," replied Gerard evasively. "If I leave anybody out, you must make my adieux for me." Then he added, as a flush

passed over his face—"You see Madame Mirabel pretty constantly, don't you?"

Lancaster started, but preserved his nonchalant air. "Of late I've seen a good deal of her," he said. "Mrs. Jickling has been in my hands, and I've had to go there rather often. But she's getting all right now, and I hear that she'll soon be going to the Continent to settle there."

Gerard did not look particularly interested in Mrs. Jickling's plans. "Because," he resumed, "if I should not be able to say good-bye to her in person, you might perhaps be kind enough to say all that is necessary for me—that's all."

"But why shouldn't you go and see her yourself?" asked Lancaster.

"For reasons which—she will herself appreciate," said Gerard, turning pink, and averting his eyes from his friend's.

Dr. Lancaster was thunderstruck. He had had no conception that there had been any feeling whatever between these two, or

on either side—and the revelation was an immense astonishment to him. "Is that so, really?" he uttered almost to himself.

"I never intended to breathe a word of this to anybody," said Gerard in a low tone. "I hate talking about my own affairs—as a rule. But now that I'm going away there's no particular reason for concealment, above all from you. Of course I shall never see her again."

"Then it's harder for you than I thought," said the doctor tenderly. "I am very, very sorry. And yet there may come a day when even you will have cause to be thankful for your disappointment. Believe me, Gerard —and I know what I'm talking of—things are infinitely better as they are."

"I can understand your saying so, of course," said Gerard with a touch of bitterness.

Lancaster looked at him in surprise. "What do you mean?" he asked curiously.

"I dare say this sort of gossip doesn't

reach you," returned Gerard, "but it exists for all that. Numbers of people here believe"——

"Believe what?" demanded Lancaster as the other paused.

"I suppose you can guess," answered Gerard. "That you and Madame Mirabel are engaged."

"Do you mean to tell me that seriously?" asked Lancaster with some excitement.

"I do indeed," replied Gerard. "I believe that Mrs. Chattering has already fixed the wedding-day, if that's anything to the purpose."

"Mrs. Chattering!" cried Lancaster in a tone of scorn.

"I hope you're not annoyed at my having mentioned it?" asked Gerard.

"Not in the very least," replied the other, recovering himself quickly. "I'm annoyed that such rumours should exist, of course; but not in the least with you. On the contrary, I am glad you've told me. It's

just as well to know what is being said about one. Mrs. Chattering, forsooth!"

He knocked the ashes out of his pipe, and took a clean one from the rack. Gerard watched him languidly, and wondered whether he would say more.

"It is not true, Gerard," he said at last, when he had got his fresh pipe well alight. "It is not true, and I give you my authority to deny it. I am not engaged to Madame Mirabel, and there is no likelihood at the present moment that I ever shall be."

Gerard drew a deep breath. "Well," he said with the glimmer of a smile, "I should certainly never have believed it on the authority of Mrs. Chattering."

"I should hope not," returned Lancaster.

The way in which Madame Mirabel's name had been brought into the conversation had given him an unpleasant twinge. He was deeply sorry that Gerard should have been fascinated by her; and yet would there not have been cause for far more serious

regret had she met his advances favourably? His own duty then would have been so much more difficult, so infinitely more painful, than it was now—supposing that his suspicions were confirmed. He had managed to force this trouble of his into the background while Gerard was talking about the strange future he had chosen for himself, but now it all came back upon him. He remembered the terrible ordeal which lay before him, and he remembered it with a shudder.

"Well," said Gerard, "I must be going back now. Thank you ever so much for promising to look after the old people—though I hope and believe it won't be any trouble to you. You'll only have to pay them their interest every quarter, you know. And I rely upon your help as regards myself."

Lancaster ratified his promises in due form, and shook the lad's hand with something more than his usual cordiality. Gerard went

away, it must be confessed, with his heart considerably lightened. It was something to know that there was nothing between Madame Mirabel and Lancaster, although it made no practical difference to him; and he felt satisfied that his parents' future was now definitely provided for. It only remained now for him to efface himself; and self-effacement is not so difficult after all when one has virtually lost everything that makes a selfish life worth living.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE ENDING OF A DAY.

NOW Madame Mirabel, who had the true scientifically-observant nature, had remarked that the more her schemes prospered with regard to Lancaster, the more she suffered from those strange horrors which for some months past had been pressing upon her so intolerably. As long as she was actually in his presence, and could hear his voice, and look confidingly into his dark, full, tender eyes, she feared nothing; there was something in his proximity which armed her against all terrors, and permitted her to defy her impalpable and relentless foe. But she knew that the price would be

exacted as soon as she was once more alone. Then it was that the vague, horrible dread would creep over her again; that the ghastly Presence would make itself felt behind her, so that she did not dare look round; that she would be conscious of something that was peering at her over her shoulder, and lurking among the very curtains of her bed. For a long time she put the whole thing down to the partial collapse of her normal health, and dipped into her favourite scientific books with a sense of comfort and support. Latterly, however,—ever since her fainting-fit, indeed—her convictions had undergone an extremely disagreeable shock. The logic of facts was now gradually proving too strong for her, and she had weak moments when the phenomena were intensely real—when she could scarcely any longer doubt that they were no subjective hallucinations, but saw them as the veritable results of certain hidden agencies, brought to bear upon her by an intelligent personalty whom she was

constrained to identify with her murdered husband. The apparition of Gaston Mirabel forced itself upon her mind as the final proof of this; and—*if* her thought were true—it would follow that there was some truth in the Theory that he had so fondly held, and that she had so derided. She *felt* that she had seen Mirabel. The bodily frame of him, indeed, was fast dissolving into dust; but how if there was another body exactly like it, only finer, subtler, intangible indeed yet indestructible, which had been separated from the grosser framework when he died, and was now perpetually about her? It might be so,—there was, after all, no absolute impossibility of it; and the thought occurred to her that perhaps we knew too little of the properties of space and matter to reject the theory that there might really be a higher sphere of being than that which we inhabit—a sphere of which our own senses are inadequate to take cognizance.

Then she had not got rid of Mirabel after

all. Her crimes had, so far, been fruitless. The man was still alive! She felt his influence every day and every night; the air was full of him; she could almost hear the passing of his ghostly form; she had once, even, gazed upon his face. Was she to be his slave for ever? Was she never to be free from him, never to forget him, never to be delivered from his haunting? Was he not dead and buried,—and if death could not rescue her from his unloved companionship, what in the wide world could?

There was but one reply—her marriage. Yes; with Lancaster as her husband she would be saved. His love would prove her truest shelter from the vengeance of the dead man. And perhaps a change of air and scene, combined with the happiness of his protection, and her consequent deliverance from persecution, would effect such an improvement in her physical and mental health as might enable her to regain her old, sound, scientific faith, and to look back upon

her present experiences as the morbid fancies of a disorganized nervous system. Oh, for a renewed enjoyment of the peace that had once been hers—that peace which passeth understanding, which comes from a settled, rooted, steadfast Unbelief! There was a time when doubts had been unknown to her, and great had been her calm; but now, alas! she was gradually losing her faith, her cherished creed had been undermined, the most disturbing possibilities presented themselves to her, and she was in the gravest jeopardy of intellectual and religious shipwreck. A trembling Christian, tormented for the first time by misgivings as to the truth of revelation, could scarcely have suffered severer pangs than did Madame Mirabel when once she realized that materialistic atheism might possibly prove untrue.

She had even begun to get a little anxious about Lancaster's continued non-appearance, and once or twice the disturbing thought occurred to her that he might have gone

further than he intended on the occasion of their last interview, and was now drawing back. She grew restless and uneasy. Mrs. Jickling was scarcely well enough to be moved immediately, and yet there was no occasion to send specially for the doctor; no, there was nothing for it but to wait. At last the suspense grew almost unendurable. She was on the point of inventing a pretext to write to him herself, when a note from him was put into her hand.

Her cheeks flushed and her eyes brightened as she tore it open. "Shall you be in to-morrow at five?" she read, as her heart beat fast. "I am very anxious to see you. —E. L." That was all; and she told herself that it was enough. The informality of the signature, the absence of any initial address, spoke volumes. Yes, she would be in. It was the very crown and crisis of her life.

She put on her widow's cap next morning for the last time,—so she told herself, laugh-

ing happily. Early in the afternoon she went upstairs and threw it off again, with a triumphant gesture, and left her delicately shaped head exposed to view with all its wealth of rich, clustering hair. Then, with a few skilful touches, she effected a transformation in her dress. She put a high, full ruff of some snow-white, gauzy material round her throat, and fastened a bunch of white and purple violets upon her shoulder; and then she surveyed herself in the glass, and saw that she looked quite young, and very, very beautiful. Her blue eyes sparkled, and her lips wreathed themselves into the happiest and sweetest smiles.

It was a century till five o'clock; but at last it came, and with it Lancaster. Her heart bounded as she heard his carriage-wheels, and she turned pale with agitation; then the front door opened and shut, and she went downstairs to meet him.

He had never seen her look more radiantly fair. As she stood for one brief instant

in the doorway she appeared to him like some bright vision from the world she did not believe in. With a simultaneous impulse they stepped forward and clasped each other's hands. The magnetic attraction of her was well-nigh too much for Lancaster; it required an almost superhuman effort not to draw her to him and press her madly to his breast. But he made the effort, and successfully. Then he placed her in a seat, and took up his stand in front of her.

"I wonder whether you guess what it is I want to say to you?" he said, looking down into her eyes.

"I think I can," she whispered.

Lancaster paused. "Ah!" he said. "To want is one thing: to be able, quite another. I think you know I love you?"

"I have hoped so," she murmured, wonderingly.

"It is at this moment my dearest wish to marry you," continued Lancaster, beginning

to regain his head. "But I have been in deep trouble lately, and until that trouble is dispelled it will be impossible for me to think, even, of any happiness. I have thought much and earnestly about the matter, and have now come to the conclusion that if I am to be helped at all it is you and you alone who can do so."

"Of course I'll help you!" cried Madame Mirabel, rising. "Who has a better right or a better will? Tell me what your trouble is. I grieve that I never knew of it before."

"Why," said Lancaster with a very tender smile, "it should be my part to keep all trouble *from* you; surely it is a cruel fate that forces me to bring it to your doors."

"Nay, not so!" she exclaimed. "Can any woman have a dearer privilege than to share all burdens with the man she loves?"

Then he thought he must have been mis-

taken. A warm rush of revived confidence welled up, for a moment, in his heart; he looked hopefully into her clear blue eyes, and smiled in answer.

"Come, tell me all about it," she resumed. "We are neither of us very stupid people, I imagine, and we ought to see a way through the difficulty somehow."

Yes, he would have to tell her. Indeed, what else had he come to see her for? The brief, mad, sudden betrayal of his love had not formed any part of his original plan; the storm of passion had come upon him unexpectedly, and had, in fact, increased the difficulty of his task to a somewhat embarrassing extent. It was hard for him, no doubt; but how much harder would it be for her?

"Listen, then," he said, collecting all his energies by a great act of self-command. "I have made a serious discovery. I have found out something about the person who sent me the false telegram from Lucerne."

Every vestige of colour fled from her face. She sank back in her chair, unable to speak or breathe. Lancaster looked at her with a searching gaze, unwilling to condemn her till she had heard all.

"The telegram was given in by a tall, elderly woman with grey hair, who was unacquainted with any language but English," pursued Lancaster. "A woman who was certainly not acting in any way on behalf of Dr. Bretschneider—a woman who had never even heard of *me*. Do you know of any person answering to that description, who was in Lucerne when the telegram was sent?"

It flashed across her mind that he must have received these particulars by some means or other through the Swiss police. The fact of course was that he had purposely adopted this mode of expression, in order if possible to shield the old woman from her daughter's wrath.

"The description is somewhat vague," said Madame Mirabel with dry lips. "Couldn't

the detectives give you anything nearer than that?"

"It is something to have learnt even so much," replied Lancaster, cautiously. "As far as I am aware, the detectives have no notion whatever as to the identity of the person referred to. That must be sought in other directions altogether. When that is discovered we shall get some clue to the kernel of the whole mystery—the question of *motive*."

"A rather hopeless quest, it seems to me," she answered carelessly, though her face was white.

He only raised his eyebrows.

"We will leave that point for the present," he continued, leaning his elbow on the mantelpiece and supporting his forehead with his hand. "I have made one other discovery, I fear—and a very dreadful one it is. I have found out the true cause of Gaston Mirabel's death."

A hollow cry escaped her; but she uttered not a word.

"You know," he resumed, "that the whole affair was a complete mystery to me. I went over Charlton's notes again and again, but was entirely unable to account for the extraordinary symptoms he described, though he himself appeared more easily satisfied. The first suggestion I received came from the book I borrowed from your own library, a comparatively short time ago. Furnished with a new and terrible hypothesis, I went once more to Charlton, and subjected him to a pretty rigorous catechism, based upon what I had been reading. Everything seemed to point to one conclusion; still I felt scarcely competent to decide myself in a case requiring so much more special knowledge than I possessed, and at once recognized the necessity for the opinion of an expert. Yesterday I went up to town, and laid the entire matter before Dr. Warden Smith, the greatest English authority on hypnotism. Shall I tell you what he said?"

She tried to speak, but could not.

"He said it afforded grounds for the gravest possible suspicions—suspicions that the patient had not died a perfectly natural death."

"Folly!" she burst out impetuously. "Gaston murdered—for that is what it comes to—who would murder him? Who had anything to do with him, except the man you left in charge yourself? Does your greatest English authority accuse any one in particular, or is the whole household to lie under suspicion? Surely, Dr. Lancaster, you cannot have shown your usual perspicacity in confiding in a man like that. Supposing he had gone so far as to accuse *me* of murdering my husband, surely, considering the relations in which we stand to one another, you would have found yourself in a very false position. Is there no other evidence?"

She had recovered from the panic that had seized her at first, and now, having broken the spell, was prepared to fight her battle.

Lancaster looked wistfully at her, as though longing for her to confute him. But he required a stronger defence than this.

"Other evidence?" he repeated, very gravely. "No, there is no other evidence. It is believed on the highest expert authority that Gaston Mirabel was done to death by the intentional misapplication of the hypnotic power. How many persons had access to him during the last few weeks of his life? They can be reckoned on the fingers of one hand. And how many of those"—his voice trembled and deepened as he went on—"had any knowledge of hypnotic science, or had made the slightest study of it? I am told that at the last you admitted no one into the sick-room under any pretext; that you, and you alone, attended him. The conclusion suggested by these facts must be as patent to you as to myself; and it is so horrible that I implore you to dispel my doubts at once."

"You astonish me beyond measure," ex-

claimed Madame Mirabel. "It comes to this—that, on the unsupported opinion of a man I never heard of, and who knows nothing whatever of the case but what you have told him, I am practically accused of murder. The doctor whom you left in charge of my late husband was too stupid to understand the symptoms, and let his patient die; and now you take his memoranda, compare them with certain imaginative theories in a book you borrowed from my own bookshelf, and forthwith jump to the conclusion that Gaston was killed by me! The whole thing is so outrageous that I am at a loss what to say to you. I scarcely know which to resent the more—your evident belief that I murdered Gaston, or your implied belief that I have faith in the contemptible quackery by which you suspect me of having done it."

"You put words into my mouth that I, at least, shrank from using," replied Lancaster, striving to be calm. "I never accused you of

murder. I have simply placed before you certain facts, which you and you alone can explain."

It was marvellous, even to Madame Mirabel herself, that, having now regained her equanimity, she should feel so perfectly cool and collected. But the mere fact that the contest she had so long dreaded had at last arrived, and that all her powers of resource were now being called into action, gave her wonderful nerve. She saw the weak points in her adversary's armour, and stood well upon her guard.

"My dear friend," she said, standing with clasped hands in front of him, "the truth is that neither you nor I are able to help each other in the least. The only way in which the actual facts could be elicited would be by a regular legal investigation,—a trial, if you will—before a jury of doctors. Of course there is no such provision that I ever heard of, and I think that in cases like the present it would be well if there were. But we must

accept things as they exist, and in view of the terrible suspicion that you have permitted yourself to harbour against me, I think that the fullest possible investigation should be made. Yes, Dr. Lancaster," she exclaimed, drawing herself up, "I am ready—nay, anxious—to be put upon my trial. More—after what you have said to me, I insist upon it. Give me at least an opportunity to clear my name before a judge in open court! And, till my innocence is proved, let us forget the words you said to me when I came into the room just now."

Lancaster, for a moment, was staggered; which she saw, and lost no time in following up her advantage.

"I think," she said, with a hurt, proud look, "that we had better postpone all further consideration of this matter until it is made public. I demand a trial; and I expect you, Dr. Lancaster, as my accuser, to take the preliminary steps. You cannot refuse. To do so would be to condone

what you believe to have been a dreadful crime, and to put an eternal bar between yourself and the woman you profess to love. I will not do you the injustice of supposing that you became the subject of these suspicions with a light heart. I am willing to believe that the circumstantial evidence appeared to you so strong as to pervert your better judgment. Be it so. But I am determined that you shall do me justice as well as I you. I will not rest content with less than I have demanded; and if, when my innocence is proved, you shrink from accepting as your wife a woman who has undergone the ignominy of a public trial, the humiliation I shall have suffered will not all rest on me."

She bowed her head slightly with a contemptuous gesture, and turned away. Truly, she told herself, she was playing her game well, for Lancaster looked the very picture of confusion and distress. Gradually but surely she was turning the tables upon him; a little more, and the victory would be gained.

"Do you mean that you actually wish me to swear a criminal information against you?" he exclaimed. "It is impossible."

"Is it?" she answered scornfully.

"The project is a mad one," he averred with emphasis. "Julia"—and her heart thrilled as she heard him call her so—"do not, I implore you, mistake me in this matter. My love is entirely yours; it is only my head that is confused by the dreadful seemings of this case. For God's sake, answer me in all solemnity and truth. Are you responsible for this man having died?"

"Responsible!" she echoed. "I call you yourself as a witness. As a nurse, could any one have been more indefatigable than I? As a wife, was I not tender, loving, devoted? Was it not I who brought you to his bedside when you first came to this place? Did not I rejoice at his wonderful recovery while in your hands? Did not I take my friends here into counsel when, in your absence, he grew worse, and telegraph for you when they

advised me to? Give me *your* interpretation of all this, and let us see how it coincides with your cruel charge!"

"I am but too willing, too anxious, to accept your own," said Lancaster fervently. "But there is one terrible, insuperable obstacle in the way. It was your mother who sent me the forged telegram from Lucerne. Who made her do it? Who knew anything of me and my affairs? And what object could there have been, if not to separate me from your husband?"

Then she knew that her fate was sealed. "Your proofs?" she uttered, turning a ghastly colour.

"You were the only person in the world to whom I had breathed a syllable of the affair at all," he answered hoarsely; "for the rest I am willing to put the question point-blank to Mrs. Jickling, and abide by what she says. Can you defend yourself against this charge also? Shall we ask her to join our conference?"

A glaze came over her eyes, and her face stiffened awfully; she struggled for breath, and clutched the window-curtain, tottering backward against the wall to prevent herself from falling. The whole universe seemed to be crashing about her ears in that one deadly moment.

"Enough!" she gasped. "I did it. I killed him. Because I loved *you*, and he stood between us. You had better send for the police at once."

She looked at him for one second—a look in which defiance, despair, and unutterable love appeared to strive for the mastery; then passed out of the room, leaving him rooted to the spot.

Because she loved *him!* In all his wonderings and speculations Lancaster had never dreamt of this. The shock of it overwhelmed him—deprived him, for the moment, of all power of speech and motion. What! —for the sake of his love that poor Mirabel had been done to death—that the whole

horrible and fiendish plot had been deliberately conceived, thought out, and executed? The love he had felt for her was changed, as if by magic, into loathing. He caught up his hat, and fled in horror from the accursed house.

* * * * *

It was all very quiet, very still, during the next two hours. The housemaid carried lights into the dining-room, and began to lay the cloth, humming softly to herself. A little bird perched upon the window-sill, twittering; and a group of country girls passed by, chattering and laughing as they trudged merrily across the moor. Downstairs, the stolid cook busied herself with her accustomed preparations; upstairs, Mrs. Jickling, having finished her invalid's meal, dozed uneasily by the fire. There was a gorgeous sunset that evening—a splendour of liquid gold, clear as crystal, melting gradually away and losing itself in an expanse of infinitely pale green, pure and

tender and pellucid. Only one person in Gorse Cottage saw that sunset; the others were too busy, or too sleepy, or too indifferent. But out-of-doors as well as in-doors, everything was very calm.

The little clock upon the mantel-piece chimed seven, and the cook, with commendable punctuality, announced the completion of her task. How pretty the dinner-table looked, with its fresh white napery, and the large bowl of delicate porcelain full of newly-gathered flowers! Yes, everything was in readiness, and only waiting for the mistress of it to appear. It was never necessary to call her, for she was exactitude itself, and the servants knew it. But to-day she lingered. There was no sound overhead, no footstep, no noise of an opening door. A quarter-past seven, and yet no sign of her. Then the housemaid plucked up her courage, and went upstairs, and tapped. She might as well have tapped upon a tombstone. Surely her mistress must have

gone out, locking the door behind her! It was very strange; she had never done so before. So the housemaid, baffled and perplexed, descended again into the nether regions and opened her heart to the cook, who suggested that madame had fallen unexpectedly asleep. Whereupon, in deference to the urgent entreaties of the housemaid, she consented to accompany the now frightened creature to the upper storey, and aid her in the siege. A gentle knock was given; then a louder one; then a fanfaronnade of knocks, accompanied by calls for a parley. But the tenant of the chamber—if indeed it had a tenant—remained dumb, and the servants stood whispering fearfully to themselves outside.

Mrs. Jickling, slumbering fitfully in the spare room, knew nothing of all this. It never occurred to either of them to take her into counsel, or ask her what they had better do. She had never been of much account to any one in that house, and so she was left

in peace. The cook and the housemaid peeped into her room just to make sure their mistress was not there, and then went gingerly downstairs again, partly on tiptoe, as though there were somebody dead.

They could not guess, and no one ever knew, all that had happened to the woman of whom they were in search. Her experiences, in truth, were such as she could never tell. When the black, impenetrable cloud, the deep, dense veil of darkest nothingness which had enveloped her—it might have been for the briefest second, or for a million million years—began to roll away, she looked down, and saw herself lying prostrate on the floor. At a little distance was a tiny phial, with a drop of some dark fluid still remaining in it, though the cork was nowhere to be seen; she noticed, too, a small brown stain upon the white ruff about her throat, and the little bunch of fragrant violets she had fastened on her shoulder-knot that very afternoon—

or was it years ago?—still in its proper place. She looked round, and recognized the room; the bed, the dressing-table, and the chairs; and yet there was something strange in their appearance—what could it be? The outlines were distinct enough, but their bulk seemed shadowy, transparent, as it were; everything looked pervious, as though the solidity she had been accustomed to associate with material objects was, after all, stereoscopic merely—nothing but an illusion of the senses. The whole room, too, seemed out of perspective, like a Chinese or a mediæval picture; there was something distorted about it, as though she were gazing at it from an impossible point of view. Then she knew instinctively that she had entered upon another stage of being altogether, a sphere outside that of her former life, yet enveloping and including it; unseen by human eyes, but commanding a view of all things, both human and transcendental. She knew that she was *alive*—

that she had survived what would be called her death. She knew there was another world, for she was now in it. She knew that she had passed into the region of the Real, and that what she had just left was the region of the Phenomenal merely.

And now, for the first time seeing things as they were, she saw and recognized her real Self. The cognition and the contemplation of it were very fearful. It was a monstrous and a terrible Thing that rose revealed before her, now that her inner sight was opened. The whole of her past life became present—not as an act of memory, but as an inalienable part of her very self, from which she could never escape. And with it came remorse, and terror, and self-loathing, and despair; a wild, hopeless, passionate longing, too, for Lancaster—a longing compared with which the longing of her earth-life had been the idlest fancy. What would she not now have given to find herself once more in the old, familiar sphere?

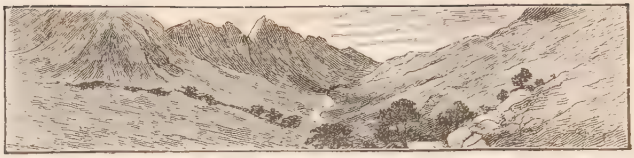
From her new standpoint she could still see it, as clearly as before ; nay, more so, for her vision was no longer limited by walls or her liberty by bars, and from where she was she saw her mother dozing by the fire in the spare room, and the white-draped dinner-table downstairs waiting silently for the guest who would never arrive. But near as it all was to her, she was separated from it by an impalpable, yet impenetrable, obstacle. There was no longer anything in common between her and it. The atmosphere of that lower plane afforded no vehicle for the sounds or utterances of the higher. There was no substance in it upon which the tenuous and subtle essence which constituted her present form could produce the faintest impression. She had no weight, no voice, no touch. She might as well have tried to cut water into shapes, or express emotion in the terms of algebra, as to communicate with her old sphere of being.

Once more she looked around, and saw

the illimitable space that she now occupied. The house that had once been hers bore the same relation to her present surroundings that a few scratches on a slate bear to the streets and the gardens, the mansions and the temples, of a great city. There was no up, no down, no far, no near. The conditions of existence were not such as could be expressed in the language of the lower world. And there were millions upon millions of living, sentient beings, who, to the unaccustomed eyes of the new-comer, seemed as if they were constantly appearing and disappearing, like bubbles on a stream. She could detect no motion, as we understand the word. They were and they were not, according, apparently, as they wished to be here or there. And yet there was no here and there, in the contracted earthly sense. It was all so different, so strange!

Then the picture-bedroom that she had once inhabited began to fade like a dissolving view. The outlines of everything

grew faint; the whole house seemed to be toppling over, like a house of cards. With a pang of despairing agony, the doomed soul witnessed the disappearance of everything it had ever believed in, and clung to, and loved. It found itself alone in the strange, new, dreadful world; alone, with its remorse, and self-loathing, and the craving that would never be appeased; alone, affrighted, and desolate, among millions of unfriendly forms.



CHAPTER IX.

THE PALLISERS SACRIFICE THEIR FEELINGS.

IT is a relief to find ourselves once more, if for the last time, in the pretty drawing-room of Mr. and Mrs. Palliser. Our worthy friends, after having undergone so much anxiety and distress, were now beginning to regain their equanimity. At length they knew the worst, and, having sufficiently bemoaned their fate, were conscious of a certain excitement, not wholly unpleasurable, in making plans for the future. The recovery of their wonted spirits had been aided, to a considerable extent, by finding that it would be unnecessary, after all, to sacrifice their furniture; an agreeable

surprise to everybody concerned, for which thanks were due to the skilful management of lawyer Harwood. Mr. Palliser, of course, was full of schemes. During the last few days he had received several kindly-worded letters from old acquaintances in the City, each of whom promised to 'look out' for him, and to let him know as soon as ever a chance occurred; and meanwhile he was in active correspondence with the promoters of a modest enterprise for manuring the Desert of Sahara, a process which, if successful, would bring about an entire reconstruction of the map of Europe, redress the balance of power, and make the whole world's fortune.

The tragedy of Gorse Cottage came upon them, and indeed upon the entire neighbourhood, like a thunderclap. Owing to the circumstances of Madame Mirabel's death, an inquest was of course inevitable; and Dr. Lancaster, having been the last person to see the deceased alive, was compelled to give some account of that most dreadful

interview. It was, indeed, only in deference to the great and universal respect in which Lancaster was held that the coroner abstained from putting such questions to him as would have necessitated the entire revelation of everything connected with the death of Dr. Mirabel, including the motive confessed to by the murderess; as it was, enough was elicited to establish the fact that there had been a dark, bad secret in the dead woman's life,—a secret the detection of which had been the main cause of her suicide. The enquiry, again, was held at Petersfield, and the distance prevented many persons from attending who would otherwise no doubt have done so; the upshot being that much unnecessary scandal was averted, the usual verdict of Temporary Insanity being delivered in due course. All this having been gone through, preparations for the funeral were set on foot. It was generally understood that a large attendance was not desirable, in view of the painful nature of

the circumstances, and several persons denied themselves, in consequence, the satisfaction they would otherwise have found in being present. A clergyman, however, could scarcely be dispensed with, and application was naturally made to the rector. But here a difficulty arose. To the surprise of every one who knew him, Mr. Grant replied that, being a serious man, he really could not take part in such a farce, and for a day or two there was some trouble in finding a suitable comedian. At length, by great good luck, a very charitable person was discovered, who never judged anybody lest he should be judged himself. This gentleman undertook to commit, and, in the presence of Gerard, Lancaster, and Mrs. Jickling, actually did commit, the vampire's body to the grave, in sure and certain hope of resurrection to eternal life; adding an expression of his hearty thanks to Almighty God for His goodness in having delivered her from the miseries of this most sinful world.

"Funerals always do try me dreadfully, you know," sighed Mrs. Palliser to her husband, as they sat alone together on the afternoon of this edifying ceremony. "I never could have gone to this one, and it's just as well that you didn't go either. Let us hope now that we shall be permitted to forget her as soon as possible. I wonder whether it *is* true that there was anything between her and Dr. Lancaster?"

"Shouldn't wonder a bit," replied Mr. Palliser, without raising his eyes from the pile of letters and prospectuses that he was sorting. "She was a remarkably clever woman as well as a very handsome one, and there's nothing more likely than that Lancaster was a bit taken with her."

"Ah, men are such fools," exclaimed Mrs. Palliser. "I do think that Dr. Lancaster ought to have known better—a man of his age. How thankful we ought to be that dear Gerard was never bewitched by her! I had my fears at one time; I don't mind con-

fessing it now that there's no more danger. That *would* have been a calamity, indeed."

"H'm—yes," murmured the good gentleman absently, as he scanned his papers. "Upon my word, there ought to be money in some o' these things. The trouble seems to be that one can't get a secretaryship or an agency without taking an interest in the concern oneself, and that means stumping up five hundred or a thousand pounds, which we unfortunately haven't got. Now here's a concern that ought to do well, you know—The Twins & Triplets Birth Insurance Co., established for the special benefit of the labouring classes and the poorer clergy. They're always having twins, you know, and it's only right they should be enabled to make some provision against it. Serious thing to some people, this occasional exuberance of nature."

"That sounds to me a little impious," remarked Mrs. Palliser. "If it pleases Providence"——

"Why is it more impious to insure against superfluous births than against premature deaths?" retorted her husband. "However," he said, pushing away his desk, "I don't think there's anything here that'll suit me just at present. We must wait, I suppose, and meantime I fancy the sooner we move up to London the better. It's always well to be on the spot, you know, in case of contingencies, and we shall be able to find some cheap lodgings to stay in while we're looking about us."

The idea of cheap London lodgings was very distressing to poor Mrs. Palliser, whose taste lay more in the direction of buttercups and country air. She sighed rather despondently at the prospect, and asked her husband what neighbourhood he was thinking of.

"Oh, I don't know," he replied; "there are lots of neighbourhoods to choose from. There's Earl's Court, for instance, only a few minutes from Kensington Gardens, and a

little further from the City, where there are any amount of lodgings, at rents that are perfectly ridiculous. Chelsea, again; only of course that's rather more out of the way. Pimlico might suit,—it's conveniently situated for some things. Bloomsbury is expensive and philistine; I don't think I'd go to Bloomsbury. But we needn't trouble our heads about a neighbourhood. There won't be any difficulty there."

"And the furniture, Marmaduke? Oh, what a blessing it is we haven't had to sacrifice the furniture! What shall we do with that in the meantime?"

"Why, we shall have to sell it, I suppose," responded Mr. Palliser. "It won't be much use to us without a house to put it in, and we can't count upon that just now, you know, of course."

"Sell it!" cried Mrs. Palliser, in consternation. "My dear Marmaduke, what for? I thought you told me that Harwood had said the furniture need *not* be sold?"

"Now just see what sort of a head you have for business," retorted her husband, witheringly. "What Harwood said was that the furniture need not be sold for the benefit of the creditors; that there was no necessity for throwing it into the common melting-pot. Whether we sell it or keep it is nothing to anybody but ourselves; only if we don't sell it, how are we going to support ourselves for the next few months, I should be glad to know?"

"Dear me, I never thought of that," exclaimed Mrs. Palliser, looking the picture of despair. "Oh, my poor china! And all those dear little silver ostriches, you know, to hold salt and pepper, and the new curtains in your poor mother's bedroom, that she chose herself! Well, well; I can only hope it'll be a reminder to us that here we have no continuing city," added the poor lady, wiping her eyes. "No doubt all these dispensations, so mysterious and so—so very unpleasant, are sent to us for some wise and

good purpose, and I dare say we deserve them all. Oh, yes, there's not a question about it, and I sometimes quite shudder when I think what *might* happen to us if we got our deserts and nothing more; ah me! Still, it *is* a pity about those little cruets, you know, and all those beautiful new table-napkins, just marked—only just marked, Marmaduke," she concluded, shaking her head plaintively; "and there's nothing for it but resignation, after all."

"No, I suppose not," assented Mr. Palliser, who was not very much of a theologian himself. "At any rate, until something definite turns up. Gerard's off our hands, that's one comfort. I wonder what *he*'ll do with himself, now that he's got the chance?"

Any reply on the part of Mrs. Palliser was interrupted by the sound of footsteps in the hall. "There he is!" she exclaimed. "How quickly he has got back, to be sure. My dear, just touch the bell, will you? We may as well have some tea."

The door opened, and Gerard entered, but not alone; he was accompanied by Dr. Lancaster. Both were of course in mourning, and both looked pale and worn; Gerard's face, however, seemed to have undergone a certain change, which could scarcely have escaped the most ordinary observer. The dreamy, half-indifferent expression had to a great extent disappeared, and in its place there was a firmer and altogether more decided look; a look which suggested a capacity for action rather than his constitutional tendency to contemplation, and imparted a character to his whole appearance that had certainly been lacking previously. The lad looked manlier, somehow—less dreamy, and more self-reliant than his wont.

"Well, Gerard dear, so you're back—Ah, Dr. Lancaster, this is most kind of you," said Mrs. Palliser in a tone of cordial welcome. "You'll be glad of some tea, no doubt. I hope you haven't caught cold, either of you, standing about on the damp ground."

This was the only reference that any of them made to what had been taking place during the afternoon.

"We're just winding up our affairs," remarked Mr. Palliser, a few minutes afterwards, when they were drinking tea. "I suppose we shall be flitting in a week or two now—seeking fresh woods and pastures new. It'll be a wrench, of course, but where's the use of crying over spilt milk? One must buy one's experience, and sometimes it costs one uncommon dear."

"Might I ask whether you have any definite plans?" enquired Dr. Lancaster, as he put down his cup.

"We think of settling in London to begin with," replied Mr. Palliser, who never made any secret of his affairs. "The furniture ought to bring us in a tolerably comfortable sum, and that no doubt will tide us over the next few months. Long before then I expect I shall have succeeded in making—

er—permanent arrangements. At present," continued the worthy gentleman, "it's rather an *embarras de richesses*. There are schemes offering in all directions—any amount of 'em. My old friends in the City are rallying round me, just as I said they would. They all promise me the very first chance that offers. And in the meantime—well! I should just like you to run your eyes over some of those prospectuses," with a wave of his plump white hand towards the pile of papers on his desk. "This smash-up in the City is clearing the air wonderfully, and the number of new enterprises being started shows how much healthier a state of things is coming on. I shouldn't wonder, after all, if it turns out to have been just the very thing we wanted."

Gerard and Lancaster exchanged glances.

"God grant it!" said poor Mrs. Palliser, thinking of her new table-napkins and pretty tea-cups. "I confess I am dreadfully disappointed that all this will have to go"—

casting her eyes fondly round the room. "I know it's very wicked to repine, but it's difficult to help it, somehow, and when I think of lodgings in Pimlico or some such place, after my dear lawns and flowers, I really don't know how I shall live through it."

"Nothing like making up one's mind to the inevitable," said her husband, with the air of a man who knew all about it by experience.

"But is it inevitable?" asked Lancaster. "Why, for instance, should you go into lodgings in Pimlico?"

"In order to be on the spot," said Mr. Palliser promptly. "Nothing like being in the swim of things, you know. And at present, at any rate, we can't afford to take a house of our own."

"I think I can suggest a better plan than that," said Gerard, speaking for the first time.

Both his parents looked at him enquiringly.

"Why—what do you propose, my dear?" asked his mother with some interest.

"Well," he replied slowly, "in the first place I don't think it at all necessary for you to live so near the City. In fact I think that—that—the further you're away from the City the better. Now while I was in the Quantocks I happened to see a house about a mile out of Williton that rather struck my fancy. It was built in a sort of cottage-style, with a good large garden round it—rather a wilderness, it's true, but that could soon be put to rights. The rooms are a fair size, though they wouldn't hold *all* this furniture, of course—it would suit you to sell some of it—and as the place has been on the landlord's hands some time he'd be ready to do it up and make it habitable if taken for a term of years. The rent's cheap enough—£30—and I've got the refusal of it. You'd much better go and live there. It'll suit you much better than Pimlico."

A very expressive pause followed. "O

my *dear* Gerard!" exclaimed Mrs. Palliser at last.

"The country's wonderfully pretty," he continued, "and living's cheap. It's healthy, too, and you'd be able to raise any amount of flowers, you know, and make friends among the neighbours, and all that. In fact, you musn't think of going into London lodgings," he added in a tone of authority. "It would never do. Lancaster will agree with me there, I know."

"But what are you going to do yourself, my boy?" asked his father.

"I? Oh, I'm going to travel," said Gerard in an off-hand way. "I can tell you about all that later. Just now I want to settle about this house at Williton, so that I can write and come to terms with the agent at once. I suppose you've no real objection, have you?"

"But it's all so sudden, my dear," ejaculated Mrs. Palliser. "I don't know what to say about it, I'm sure. Do you think we

could live as cheaply in the country as we could "——

"You'll certainly be able to live comfortably enough on three hundred a year," replied Gerard. "I'm already provided for; you needn't trouble your heads about me. I have a career opening for me abroad, and my proposal is that during my absence the income my grandmother left me shall be paid over to you. Lancaster has kindly promised to see to that. The whole thing is as simple as it can be. I shan't want the money, and you will have the use of it while I'm away—that's all."

The old people said nothing. Mrs. Palliser wiped away a silent tear or two, and her husband blew his nose loudly, with a deep frown; but it seemed a difficult thing for either of them to speak. A settled income—a sweet country home—and part, at any rate, of the pretty furniture she loved so well,—yes, it was indeed a pleasant prospect; and the good lady began to think that,

after all, Providence was going to relent, and temper the wind to the shorn lamb. Gerard saw that the battle was so far virtually won. The most difficult task, of course, was still before him.

"But what's this career that you say you've got?" asked Mr. Palliser at last, in a rather stifled voice.

"It's one that will give me work—the very sort of work I've always wanted," replied the lad boldly, "and support me into the bargain. Of course," he added rather cunningly, "as I have always my own money to fall back upon, I don't want to make a fortune. And it'll be a change, and I shall see something of other parts, and gain experience, you know. Of course you'll hear from me while I'm away."

"But what is it, and whereabouts, and how long shall you be there?" enquired his mother anxiously.

"Well," replied Gerard, "it's a post that's connected with—er—science, to some extent,

and also with education. I shall be learning and teaching at the same time. And I needn't stay a day longer than I want to. I could come back any time, in fact. Supposing, for instance, father were to succeed in getting any of those agencies or secretaryships, and you wanted to move into town, I don't think there'd be any difficulty in my returning in time to take over the house at Williton, you know. Nothing could be more convenient in that way, I assure you."

"H'm," muttered Mr. Palliser, with a meditative air. "You certainly seem to have fallen on your feet, Gerard. And what *is* the post? Whereabouts?"

"It's in Saghalien," he replied briefly.

"Saghalien?" echoed his mother, looking considerably perplexed. "Now where did I hear something about Saghalien not so very long ago? I remember perfectly—no—well, somebody was telling me something about it, I'm sure, though what it was I really"——

"Saghalien?" repeated Mr. Palliser in astonishment. "Why, it's a sort of desert, isn't it, somewhere in the Arctic Circle? My word, yes—I know all about it; a great place for salmon-fishing, to be sure. Ah, I used to be very fond of salmon-fishing, when I was a young man. Many's the big catch I've had in Norway and in Scotland—fine sport when you get enough of it, very. But you're not going there for the salmon altogether, I take it—eh? Though I tell you what, my boy—if you were to keep your weather-eye open, and just let me know what prospects there are for something like a regular business, you understand—fishing, curing, smoking, tinning, and that sort o' thing, why we might see what's to be done in the way of a limited company. I should be on the spot here, you know, and you'd be on the spot there, and between us we might work up something worth having. It's not at all a bad idea. What do you think about it, Lancaster?"

"It sounds very attractive," said the doctor, smiling gravely.

"I'll certainly bear it in mind when I arrive," said Gerard. "There may be seals in the neighbourhood, too—they would prove even more profitable still."

This suggestion captivated Mr. Palliser to such an extent that for some time he really forgot that he had never enquired what Gerard's actual business was to be. His son, however, knowing that the fact would have to be disclosed sooner or later, saw the futility of availing himself of his father's preoccupation, and considered that he would probably never have a more favourable opportunity of laying his plans before them than the present.

"But you haven't told us what your occupation is to be, Gerard dear," said his mother, with some anxiety.

"I'm going to join that Secular Mission that Lancaster was telling us about some weeks ago," he replied.

"Secular Mission!" exclaimed Mr. Palliser, astonished.

"O Marmaduke, he's going among the lepers!" cried the mother in a sudden burst of consternation. "I remember it all now; of course, it was Dr. Lancaster who told us of it. Why Gerard, my own darling child, you must be mad to think of such a thing! I will never permit it—never. And we are to live upon your money all the time, while you are in that horrible place and exposed to the most awful danger from infection—and such infection! Marmaduke, tell him he mustn't dream of such a thing. O Dr. Lancaster, it isn't you who have put this into his head, is it?"

"No, mother, it was not Lancaster," said Gerard, quickly.

"But what is it? what's it all about?" enquired Mr. Palliser. "This is the first I've heard of it. Lepers! What in the world does the boy want to go among a lot of lepers for, I should be glad to know?"

Gerard glanced at Lancaster, who promptly responded to the appeal. He gave Mr. Palliser a brief though comprehensive account of the Leper Settlement in Saghalien, and the various charitable undertakings that were in course of being carried out in connection with it; dwelling chiefly upon the objects of the Secular Mission, and the results which were hoped for from its work among the sufferers. He said nothing about Gerard personally, but pointed out the usefulness and value of the enterprise from the standpoint of pure philanthropy.

"Well, it all sounds very fine and very noble," observed Mr. Palliser, who, to do him justice, was a great deal more moved than he cared to show, "but what I want to know is why Gerard should insist on taking up this particular work. Surely there are lots of undertakings in England that he might go in for—quite as useful, and yet without danger to his health. There's slumming, for instance, that's not a bad sort o' thing to take

up ; or—or—oh, I don't know ; there are any amount of things of the same sort. But going to the North Pole or wherever it is to work among the lepers—why I'd almost sooner he enlisted ! "

" It's too cruel," sobbed Mrs. Palliser. " We shall never see you again, Gerard ; you'll catch the leprosy before you've been there a month, and—oh, to think of the sacrifice of your dear young life, my boy, my own, own boy ! O Dr. Lancaster, dissuade him,—Marmaduke, you mustn't let him go. The very thought of it half kills me. He's the only child I have, and I cannot give him up."

" The dangers of infection are very greatly exaggerated, believe me," interposed Dr. Lancaster. " With careful regard to diet and certain sanitary precautions, there is no ground whatever for fear that he will contract the disease. You must remember that there is an excellent medical staff consisting of scientific men who have made leprosy

their special study, and now that the leper-bacillus has been discovered, we may hope that the medical authorities in Saghalien may achieve the honour of discovering an antidote, or counter-agent—resulting it may be in the cure, and even in the extinction, of the malady altogether. Every safeguard is employed in the interest of the members of the mission, and the rules are extremely stringent, I assure you. Nobody need, nobody *can*, catch the disease who doesn't 'go in' for doing so, as Damien did. The danger of infection is, in fact, reduced to a minimum, while the possibilities are, from a scientific and pathological standpoint, magnificent. Gerard would not, of course, be able to participate in the technicalities of the undertaking, as he knows nothing, I believe, of medicine; but he would co-operate, and that by giving the sufferers themselves a new interest in life—teaching them, amusing them, working with them, taking part in their physical and intellectual recreation, and so

not only making the world a happier place for them than it has hitherto been, but rendering the patients more susceptible, through their improved mental condition, to the treatment of the doctors. That is the practical side of the question. I need not expatiate upon the moral value of the undertaking, subjectively considered; your own opinion, however, would no doubt coincide with mine."

Mrs. Palliser's sobs grew rather less spasmodic, and she wiped her eyes, making a valiant effort to be comforted; but her distress was still very great. She turned towards her husband, wondering what he would say; but Mr. Palliser's brow was dark, and he only hummed and grunted portentously to himself, as his wont was when in a quandary. At that moment, so critical a moment in the three lives concerned, there came a loud ring at the front door bell, accompanied by a prolonged knock. A visit just then seemed to all of them most unfortunately timed; to Gerard,

however, it came as a relief, and even to his parents it afforded a certain mitigation of feelings too painful to be borne much longer.

"My dear good creature," exclaimed Mrs. Fullerton, rustling into the room in her voluminous black silks, and making straight for Mrs. Palliser, "I've been wanting to come and see you for an age; I can't tell you how much we've all been thinking about you this last week or two, and wondering what we could do to comfort you. And how do *you* do, Mr. Palliser? Ah, it's been a trying time—you needn't tell me that, *I* know all about it. And Dr. Lancaster, I declare!" added the good lady, with a touch of diffidence. "Well, well, I won't say anything—I never do, you know; but I sympathize, you must understand, sympathize very strongly, with everybody who's in trouble."

Gerard, under cover of the growing darkness, had quietly slipped out of the room.

"Ah, it's been a terrible time, lately,

hasn't it?" resumed Mrs. Fullerton, settling herself in a comfortable chair and accepting a cup of tea. "And we've all felt it, you know. At times like these we can't help feeling how we're all members one of another, and the whole world kin, so to speak. It's a wonderful thing, the human heart, I often think; isn't it, Mr. Palliser?"

"Most unaccountable," replied that gentleman, not having any very distinct idea as to what was meant.

Dr. Lancaster here rose, and very gravely took his leave. He had matters to attend to, he said, of some importance, and it was getting late. Mr. Palliser saw him to the front door, and he drove rapidly away.

"Well, now," exclaimed Mrs. Fullerton, as soon as the coast was clear, "I do wonder what the real truth of all that business was. I'm afraid she was a wicked woman, you know; and yet I had got positively fond of her, during the last few months. There was a way about her, somehow, that was quite

fascinating, and made you take to her while it was altogether impossible to approve of her. The whole thing has made me perfectly ill. Only the other day, you know, in my drawing-room, the life and soul of the party; and now—dead by her own hand! The only consolation is that *somebody*'s had an escape. How worn and ill he looks!"

"Yes, he must have suffered very much—if all reports are true," said Mrs. Palliser.

"Oh, they are true enough, I'm afraid," responded Mrs. Fullerton, nodding till the feathers in her bonnet vibrated again. "It's a bad business when a fine man like that lets himself be captivated by a designing woman—a pretty life she'd have led him if she'd had the chance. But there, I don't want to think any more about it than I can help. She's put herself beyond the scope of *our* judgment, and we can only hope she'll find more mercy where she's gone than she deserves, poor creature. One can't have a better wish for her than that."

"I suppose you haven't heard anything about the funeral?" asked Mrs. Palliser.

"I? Oh, dear no," answered Mrs. Fullerton. "I suppose the old mother was there; they could scarcely have kept her away, I should think. I wonder what'll become of *her*, now that her daughter's dead? However, I didn't come here to talk about all this. I want to know what *you* dear people are going to do with yourselves, and whether it really is true that you're thinking of leaving Hindhead."

"Oh yes, that is true enough," said Mrs. Palliser quietly. "We have lost all our money through these troubles in the City, and we've got to begin the world all over again."

"You don't mean that?" exclaimed Mrs. Fullerton. "That's bad news—at least it sounds so. Let's hear more about it. What do you intend to do?"

Mrs. Palliser gave a little embarrassed cough, and hesitated. Her husband hummed

once or twice, and began to clear his throat. The communicativeness of these good people certainly knew no bounds.

"The fact is," said Mr. Palliser, coming to his wife's rescue, "that the last half-hour or so has brought a rather remarkable change over—er—over our plans. We hardly know what to do. Before that, our idea was to take lodgings in London until certain—er—permanent arrangements were completed. I am not altogether without prospects, in any case; prospects in the City, you understand. Of course I'm very well known there, and with my business capacity there's every reason to believe I might get into some very lucrative undertaking. In fact," jerking his head backwards in the direction of his desk, "there are fortunes to be made in half-a-dozen different ways. But now"——

"Well; and now?" put in Mrs. Fullerton, as he paused.

"You may as well tell Mrs. Fullerton the whole thing, my dear," said Mrs. Palliser.

Then it all came out. Bit by bit the worthy couple narrated the story of Gerard's proposal with regard to the disposition of his income, and the plans he had formed for his own future. It took some time in the telling, for they constantly interrupted each other, and interspersed little sighs and groans and exclamations—at least Mrs. Palliser did; but at last the narrative was finished, both text and commentary, and a rather ominous silence supervened.

"Oh!" snapped Mrs. Fullerton at last. "And what do you propose to do?"

"We don't know *what* to do!" cried Mrs. Palliser with a little sob. "How can we reconcile ourselves to living upon the dear boy's own money while he is an exile in that dreadful place all those thousands of miles away?"

"*I* feel as though I should never be able to respect myself again," said Mr. Palliser. "If it weren't for my wife's sake"——

"O Marmaduke, don't say that!" exclaimed

Mrs. Palliser. "I know what a useless creature I am; but I could put up with any privations sooner than feel I was sacrificing dear Gerard's happiness. Suppose he were never to come back!"

"Now wait a minute, my dear," interposed Mrs. Fullerton. "Just answer me a question or two. You talk about sacrificing Gerard's happiness. Do you think, then, it would conduce to his happiness to enjoy his own fortune while you were starving in a London lodging-house?"

"Starving!" exclaimed Mr. Palliser rather indignantly. "With the prospects I have in view"——

"Prospects won't keep you in beef and pudding, my good friend, and prospects won't pay your rent," said Mrs. Fullerton rather brusquely. "Gerard's a very young man, and can afford to spend a few years in making himself useful in the world. It's only just and proper that he should come to his parents' rescue now that they're in

trouble, and I don't see that you've any right whatever to prevent him."

"But it's none the less painful for us"—began Mrs. Palliser.

"Painful? Of course it's painful," retorted Mrs. Fullerton. "But think what it is for him! Come, my dear, you're a religious woman, and you oughtn't to want me to remind you that it's more blessed to give than to receive. Why should you always want to keep the better part yourself? Why should you grudge your boy the blessedness of giving to you, when you've been giving to him so generously all these years? Why should you shrink from enduring a little pain when you know that it's only the price you have to pay for the pleasure that will accrue to him? Ay, and *such* pleasure. Ah, my dear, don't grudge it him. *I* had a son once, my dear—well, well, there are some griefs that never die, I suppose. His ideas of pleasure were different from Gerard's, and the pain they

gave me had a sting in it that yours can never have. Be thankful that your boy is what he now proves himself to be, and, if he is still bent upon this work, bid him, in God's name, go forth and do it!"

Mrs. Fullerton's face had grown red in her excitement, and she nodded her head with an earnestness that was almost fierce; then, in spite of all her efforts, two great tears started to her eyes, and rolled down her large cheeks before she could get out her pocket-handkerchief. Mr. Palliser rose from his chair, and began to pace the room in a brown study, while his wife wept silently where she sat.

"Well," he said at last, "of course that's one way of looking at it. We shall have to think the matter over. And then there's no reason why the boy should stay out there indefinitely. Long before he comes back again I shall be in a very different position, of course; and in the meantime he'll always know he's got a home in England, ready and

waiting to receive him. I only wish he'd fixed upon rather a cleanlier occupation in the meantime."

"O my dear, if it's God's will, He will take care of him," said the mother, wiping away her tears. "How I shall pray for him—morning, noon, and night!"

"Well, now I shall say good-bye," said Mrs. Fullerton, getting up rather suddenly. "You think over what I've said, now; and come and see me as soon as ever you can. You won't be leaving for a week or two, I think you said. There'll be plenty of time. And if I can help you in any way, you know—packing up, or anything of that sort—why you must just let me know."

"I will indeed, dear Mrs. Fullerton; and thank you a thousand times," said Mrs. Palliser gratefully.

"Say good-bye to Gerard for me," continued the good lady; "I suppose he isn't in. Perhaps it's just as well he isn't, for he's rather a reserved boy, I've noticed, and—

and—I do think that if he were here now I should be tempted to give him a kiss. There! Don't you tell him, mind; he'd never forgive me, I'm afraid. Good-bye, once more—good-bye."

Mrs. Fullerton was soon tramping at a leisurely pace in the direction of her own house, having left the Pallisers something with which to occupy their minds in the shape of a perfectly new idea. It is rather bewildering, no doubt, when one is told for the first time that acceptance of an easy and agreeable life at the expense of another's toil may be an act of self-sacrifice even greater than that of the giver; and to these good, easy-going, affectionate people the notion seemed a hopeless paradox. Their final decision was of course a foregone conclusion, though they scarcely recognized the fact; and they were assisted in arriving at it by Gerard's assurance that the preparations for his voyage were virtually completed, and that his own determination was irrevocable. Gradually,

therefore, they got first accustomed, and then almost reconciled, to the arrangement; so that within the next few days Mrs. Palliser was cheerfully engaged in deciding whether a flower or a stripe would be more suitable for the curtains in her new drawing-room, and weighing the respective merits of kamptulicon and Chinese matting as a floor-cloth for the hall.

CHAPTER X.

AFTERWARDS.

OUR curtain rises for the last time. It is but a short while since the events recorded in the foregoing chapter, but the changes that have come about are neither few nor small. There have been changes of place and circumstance, and these are naturally the most obvious; there have also been changes of mood and mind, and these are the most important.

Now Mr. Austin Caxton, relying upon the authority of Fielding, who was "an artistical writer and knew what he was about," lays it down as the duty of an author to intrude his personality upon the reader every now and

then, in the form of direct address. The reader, however, is generally (and very justly) impatient of such digressions, which he calls by the generic name of padding ; and there are few authors other than Fielding and the creator of Mr. Caxton who can afford to take the liberty. The present writer cannot afford to do so, for one ; and therefore—being about to do it—craves pardon in anticipation. His offence is perpetrated late in the story, and will be soon over. There is an unwritten but widely recognized canon that every novel is bound to end (what is called) "happily." This is a euphemism which means that one if not two couples from among the characters have to be married in the last chapter. Of course it would be impertinent for any one to affirm that this explanation is necessarily and palpably irrelevant. A marriage may be a happy ending, or it may not. In many cases it seems to be an unhappy beginning—judging from what one reads in the newspapers. On

the other hand, even a love-match does not always turn out badly, and a *mariage de convenance* has been known to produce results in which the *convenances* have been conspicuously absent. But however this may be, it is surely time a protest were made against the tyrannical law in question. If a novel can, without violence to probability, be coaxed into ending happily, by all means let advantage be taken of its pliancy; but to say that the coupling together of two persons for the term of their natural lives is the only way in which a story of human passion, and foibles, and vicissitudes can satisfactorily end, is, to say the least, a somewhat sweeping statement. Marriage is not the *summum bonum* of human felicity; it is simply a means to an end, and sometimes a very inadequate means too. A wedding may be poetical, idyllic, and—given good dressmakers and an artistic florist—even picturesque; and chimes, at a certain distance, sound not unpleasantly in the ears of one

who has not been a participator in the ceremony. But marriage is the exact reverse. It is prosaic, it is humdrum, it is very, very real. Nothing can undo it, saving crime and death. The condition is a condition of servitude; bearable, no doubt, in most cases, because so many people bear it, pleasant in the cases of a few, but servitude nevertheless. And the position too often assigned to it in fiction, as the crown and climax of a story, is surely at variance with its position in real life. There it is only a prelude to the comedy or tragedy ensuing. Without it, many of the most familiar of our *dramatis personæ* could not exist. The mother-in-law, for instance, would be no more than an abstraction, a potentiality, an unknown creature of the imagination. The deceaseable-wife's sister would be powerless to threaten the equanimity of the wife, to disturb the peace of bishops, and generally contribute her share to the pleasure of the world she lives in. There would be no

husband's bachelor-friends for the wife to be jealous of or fall in love with; no step-mothers to make things pleasant for children already in existence, no henpecked Benedicks, no troublesome grey mares. For all these things we are indebted to marriage; they could no more exist without it than colour without light, and the observer, if he be not too tender-hearted, reaps the benefit. To drop the curtain on a marriage, therefore, is an artistic blunder only less serious than the forcible dragging-in of a marriage, *vi et armis*, in deference to the supposed predilections of some unknown reader. Surely the characters in a story should be suffered to do what people do in real life—shape their destinies according to their natural dispositions as far as circumstances allow; and I submit that none of the personages whose fortunes we have followed hitherto are in a position to marry without the grossest violation of dramatic propriety, or should be permitted to do so if they wished.

The few lines which still remain to be written will, it is hoped, make this sufficiently clear.

To begin with,—the crisis through which he had passed resulted in the formation, by Lancaster, of two very serious resolutions. The first was to avoid any but the most purely formal, that is to say professional, relations with women. It was enough for him that he had once known what true love really is ; that experience could never, in the nature of things, be repeated ; and the warning he had received to refrain from any attempt to reproduce it was terrible enough to last him all his life. The second was equally judicious. He determined to devote himself to the special and exclusive study of therapeutic hypnotism, with a view to employing it as a curative agent in cases of both physical and moral infirmity. The power of it to ease pain, alleviate morbid symptoms, and vitalize the bodily functions was now, in his eyes, incontestable ; and,

looking upon the phenomena called sin, vice, wickedness—in fact, all moral imperfection of whatever kind — as manifestations of *disease*, he resolved to become, as far as he was able, a true Physician of the Soul—destroying, by hypnotic suggestion, the very love of vice itself, and all desire or even tendency to indulge in it. He was now fully convinced that, by virtue of this divine faculty, the gambler, the drunkard, the sensualist, the termagant, and the thief might be cured of their tyrant vices as surely and as safely as the dyspeptic or the scrofulous, and transformed into 'saved,' or healthy, souls; saved in the truest sense of the word, by being freed from sin. The one misgiving that presented itself to his mind was lest this short cut, this royal road, to goodness might not be condemned upon the mere ground that it dispensed with that desperate moral conflict, success in which alone means achievement of the only goodness worth the name. Still, a sick man cured by external

agency is surely a happier and more useful being than one left to die because he cannot cure himself; to be even a good automaton is better than to be a bad man; and if the question of moral responsibility be raised, it is clear that a very grave amount of such responsibility would rest upon the man who preferred continuance in vice or sin to liberation from it through therapeutic hypnotism —who elected, in short, to remain a victim to his own moral disorganization instead of invoking the aid of one who had it in his power to say, and to say effectively, "Go, and sin no more!" Surely, pondered Lancaster, all other inventions and discoveries sink into insignificance when compared with this wonderful and peerless gift; by the trained exercise of which moral weakness can be made strong, human beings delivered from the bondage of their most despotic vices, and sin itself 'suggested' out of existence.

Mrs. Jickling, in consequence of her

daughter having died intestate, inherited all her money. She found herself, in fact, in exceedingly comfortable circumstances, and forthwith gave up all thoughts of retiring to a cheap *pension* at Heidelberg. But it was not only in her circumstances that she was different from what she had previously been. The sordid tragedy in which she had borne a part had in truth exercised a powerful influence upon her, and from that time forward she was a changed woman. Before, she had certainly been a sinner, and it is not, perhaps, too much to say that she was one still ; but now she became uneasily conscious of the fact, and began to turn her thoughts toward religion. It would be scarcely true to affirm that she became less mean, less narrow, less selfish than in former days ; her idiosyncracies were too deeply-rooted to undergo any marked or conspicuous improvement, even under the influence of her new faith. But somehow they assumed a different shape, and were manifested in different modes.

Not far from the respectable and eminently genteel house she took in the neighbourhood of Homerton, there was a certain low-browed, plain brick building, standing near the entrance of a mews, and frequented, as she did not fail to notice, by a number of rather oddly-dressed, not to say shabby, persons, every Sunday morning. In answer to her enquiries she was informed that the building was a 'room'; and, somewhat mystified by the expression, she determined to venture into it next time the doors were open. She found herself in a plain, square, whitewashed apartment, furnished with hard, deal benches. At one end there was a table, covered with a coarse white cloth, on which stood a plate containing an ordinary cottage loaf, a glass jug half full of wine, and two thick tumblers. The congregation, which numbered some fifty or sixty persons, assembled slowly and silently; and then, a tall, gaunt, ascetic-looking man, who sat near the table, rose and offered prayer. Mrs. Jickling, not a

little wondering, and somewhat awestruck, now became very attentive. The strange informality of the proceedings, the solemn silences between the hymns and the readings and the prayers, the unexpected rising of a man here and a man there to give out a chapter or to pray, the tacit assumption on the part of the worshippers that 'the Lord' was peculiarly and exclusively *their* Lord—theirs and nobody else's—had a very powerful effect upon her. These, then, were 'the elect' of whom she had heard in years gone by—these oddly-dressed, solemn people; while she, sitting at the back, and carefully passed over when the loaf and the wine went round, she was an outcast, a worldling, a religious pariah. The whole thing took a strong hold on her imagination. She went again, and yet again; was noticed, and spoken to, by two or three of the leaders; and, within three months, was formally received into the community, which proved to be a branch of the Darbyite sub-section of

the Plymouth Brethren. Under the influences now brought to bear upon her, she learnt to regard the little brotherhood in the light of "a garden walled around, chosen and made peculiar ground;" the members thereof as, not so much the special, as the only, people of God; and all other religious denominations, together with missionary societies, and philanthropic organizations for the social, moral, and spiritual improvement of "the world" generally, as—at their best—churches of Laodicea, and—at their worst—synagogues of Satan. In short, she made a very good 'Brethren' indeed; there is no doubt that she was considerably happier than she had been before, and I do not think that she was any worse.

About a mile from the little town of Williton, perched on rich, grassy slopes commanding a view of the Bristol Channel, and surrounded by yellow cornfields, stood Mousetoes Manor, the Pallisers' new home. How

it ever came by such a name, nobody seemed to know; and Mrs. Palliser declared at once that she could not and would not put up with it. In the first place, it was not a Manor in any sense of the word. It was just an unpretending, irregular, comfortable sort of house, built of thick rough cobble that had been washed a mellow cream-colour, with diamond-paned windows and a roof of dark-red pantiles—for the 'slated hideousness' which deforms the face of nature in most parts of England is but seldom seen in Quantockian Somersetshire—containing some half-dozen tolerably spacious rooms, low-pitched, perhaps, and just a trifle sombre, but adorned with not a little finely-carved, dark oak. It had been well furnished, too, for Mrs. Palliser had put as much of her Hindhead treasures into it as it would hold—and that was not much more than a third of them, so there was money in hand from the auction-sale of the rest; and around it on all sides

lay a large but neglected garden, with any amount of thick soft turf, and rich, brownish-crimson soil, and a belt of spreading trees. A sunny place it was, too, its position giving one that delightful sense of altitude and exhilaration so conducive to habitual cheerfulness; while its warmth and harmony of colouring threw over it a certain suggestion of the picturesque, which many far more pretentious edifices so often lack. Mrs. Palliser fell speedily in love with it, the more so, she averred, as it belonged to her dear boy Gerard. But 'Mousetoes' it should not be. The day before he left, Gerard, who happened to have been reading *Lycidas*, suggested 'High Lawns' as at once appropriate and classical. His mother caught at the idea, and with tears in her eyes vowed that any name consecrated by her son's approval needed no other recommendation. As High Lawns, therefore, the house was known thenceforth.

And Gerard himself—where was he, on that sweet summer evening, while Mr. and Mrs. Palliser, gradually recovering from the agony of separation, were walking to and fro upon the velvet turf in front of the old house as the sun sank slowly westward? On the wide waste of waters; the tumbling, grey Pacific. They had received several letters from him since he left, and had been much cheered by assurances of his content. That he was buoyantly happy, in the old, selfish sense, was not, perhaps, the case. He had left England and his cherished aspirations far behind. His future was obscure, and could scarcely be called inviting. The shock he had sustained by learning the entire truth about the deaths of Mirabel and the woman he had loved—for Lancaster took him, and him alone, into his confidence—had not yet worn away. And yet he was very, very far from being wretched. It was a profound satisfaction to him to think that he had been able to leave his parents in circumstances of

comfort if not of luxury. He was glad to dwell upon the fact that his own life was to be devoted to the relief of suffering and the attempt to bring happiness into the lives of miserable outcasts. And the more these thoughts came home to him—the more fully he realized that he was at last actually started upon a career of *usefulness*, and that his lot was no longer to be one of dreaming, but of *doing*—the greater grew his peace. No morbid introspection, no abstract speculatings, not even the adoption of a formal creed, could have brought him that; in honest, arduous work for the good of others, and in that alone, lay the secret which had so long eluded him.

"A fugitive and gracious light he seeks,
Shy to illumine; *let us seek it too!* *
This does not come with houses or with gold,
With place, with honour, and a flattering crew;

* The worshipper of Matthew Arnold will, I trust, forgive the slight verbal alteration here.

'Tis not in the world's market bought and sold—
  But the smooth-slipping weeks
Drop by, and leave its seeker still untired ;
  Out of the heed of mortals he is gone,
  He wends unfollowed, he must house alone ;
Yet on he fares, by his own heart inspired."

THE END.

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